

Fire safety information is lacking ; Nursing home residents and their families often unaware of problems; [FINAL Edition]

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ABSTRACT

Fire safety professionals and state and federal regulators have recognized for decades that fire is a significant risk for many of the nation's 1.4 million nursing-home residents. Fatal fires are relatively rare - about 40 people have died in nursing-home fires in the past three years. But when a fire strikes a poorly equipped facility, such as the Nashville home, the toll can be catastrophic.

A tip sheet published by the American Association of Retired Persons on how to choose a nursing home, for instance, makes no mention of checking for sprinklers or other fire safety features. The same is true of a tip sheet put out by the American Health Care Association, the largest nursing home industry group.

The fire that killed 104-year-old Adele Clemens at the Gracedale nursing home was sparked by a damaged electrical outlet in a receptacle box that stuck out from the wall. Clemens' bed struck the box whenever the bed was raised or reclined. Eventually, that caused a short circuit.

FULL TEXT VERSION

NASHVILLE -- Bobby Connelly's mother always worried that her firefighting son would die in flames. But as Connelly, a district fire chief, sped toward his mother's nursing home in September 2003, it was his turn to fear the worst.

"When I got there, I could see the fire was on the side of the building where my mother's room was," Connelly recalls. He rushed to his mother's second-floor room, connected by a bathroom to the room where the fire started.

She wasn't there.

She wasn't among the patients sent to nearby hospital, either. Then a firefighter told him the bodies of residents who had died in the fire were moved to an upstairs porch.

"The third or fourth one I looked at was her," Connelly says. "She was extremely smoked up and had some burns. I recognized her by her ring."

Thelma Connelly, 96, was one of 15 patients to die in the fire at the NHC HealthCare Center. The four-story nursing home had no sprinklers and no smoke alarms in the residents' rooms.

"In all the times I was there, I don't think I ever once looked up to see if there was a sprinkler," Connelly says. "That's a guilt that I have. ... When you put someone in a nursing home, you look for a nice clean place, a place where they'll take good care of someone, where the food is good. Fire safety is probably down the list of things most people look at. I never did."

Fires in nursing homes are relatively common -- about 2,300 are reported each year, roughly one fire for every seven facilities. Yet, guides on how to choose a nursing home, published by consumer and industry groups, often fail to suggest checking a facility's fire safeguards.

The federal agency that regulates nursing homes, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, also does little to help consumers when it comes to fire safety. The CMS Nursing Home Compare website lists all citations a facility gets for deficiencies in patient care. But it fails to list fire safety violations or show which facilities have sprinklers and other basic protections.

About 3,500 nursing homes have no sprinklers and thousands lack smoke alarms in residents' rooms -- features that state and federal regulations often do not require for older facilities.

What's more, the rules that do exist are violated often: In each of the past five years, a USA TODAY analysis of federal data shows, at least 60% of all nursing homes were cited by state or federal regulators for violating fire safety standards.

Fire safety professionals and state and federal regulators have recognized for decades that fire is a significant risk for many of the nation's 1.4 million nursing-home residents. Fatal fires are relatively rare -- about 40 people have died in nursing-home fires in the past three years. But when a fire strikes a poorly equipped facility, such as the Nashville home, the toll can be catastrophic.

Still, nursing-home residents and their families seem largely unaware of the problem.

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The publications that do urge consumers to check on fire safety often suggest only that they ask whether a facility meets all relevant fire codes.

That isn't always enough, fire experts say.

"What the (federal regulations) require is a minimum," says George Miller, a retired New Jersey state fire marshal who chairs the International Consortium for Fire Safety, Health and the Environment, a non-profit advocacy group. Sprinklers, he says, are a good example: "They're not always required, but it's pretty hard to argue against having them."

Ira Clemens can't believe he didn't think to check for fire hazards at the Pennsylvania nursing home where his mother died in a March 2003 fire.

The fire that killed 104-year-old Adele Clemens at the Gracedale nursing home was sparked by a damaged electrical outlet in a receptacle box that stuck out from the wall. Clemens' bed struck the box whenever the bed was raised or reclined. Eventually, that caused a short circuit.

Clemens' death was especially tough for her son, Ira, because he used to work in a job where he assessed fire protections at other buildings.

"I remember noticing the receptacles ... but I should have looked behind her bed and seen that the outlet was damaged," says Clemens, now retired. "That's where I kick myself. I could have gone to the managers and banged my fist on someone's desk and demanded that they fix it."

Now, Clemens is struggling to deal with his mother's death.

"She went from horse and buggy days to the space age, and to have her die this way ... it wasn't right," he says. "You can't put into words how you feel. It's hell."