

Op-Ed

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It has been my honor to be a member of America's fire service for more than 30 years. In that time I have witnessed impressive advancements in both fire safety and firefighting. Unfortunately, fire is still a very real threat and, in some ways, even more dangerous than in the past. Eighty-two percent of all fire deaths and 76 percent of all fire injuries in our country occur in the home — the very place in which we should feel most safe. Most fire deaths occur in homes without working smoke alarms, and a significant portion of fire injuries occur when people are going about the daily routine of cooking. The combustibility of home furnishings with synthetic components, modern building design with open floor plans, and energy-efficient sealing of home exteriors can all contribute to the rapid acceleration of a typical residential fire to the point at which escape becomes all but impossible. In past decades, you had about 15 minutes to safely escape a home fire, but today that window of opportunity is as little as three minutes. We used to speak of every minute counting; we now count every second.

Millions of Americans have installed smoke alarms in their homes over the past few decades. A smoke alarm is a vital safety measure that will alert the occupants to a fire in the house, but a smoke alarm can't put the fire out. Residential sprinklers can contain the fire. We protect our businesses from fire with sprinkler systems; why not our families and our homes? The installation of home fire sprinkler systems has the potential to save thousands of lives, prevent a large portion of injuries, and eliminate hundreds and millions of dollars in property loss.

I am concerned that few of us are truly prepared for the reality of a home fire. Most people don't understand how fast and deadly a home fire is and that it can happen to them. They don't realize that smoke, rather than flames, is more often the killer. We need the American public to take steps to keep themselves and their families safe. The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) recently introduced Fire is Everyone's Fight™, a national initiative to make fire prevention in our homes as common and habitual as locking our doors at night. In conjunction with national partners and supporters, Fire is Everyone's Fight provides fire and emergency service personnel with tools to educate the public about the realities of fire.

Through Fire is Everyone's Fight, USFA and its partners and supporters are encouraging everyone to take a number of steps to protect themselves and their families. Install smoke alarms on every level of your home and outside each sleeping area, test them regularly, and replace the entire unit every 10 years. Practice safe cooking. Stand by your pan while you're cooking. If you must step away from the kitchen while cooking, turn the burner off. And, for the best protection against fire, install a fire sprinkler system in your home.

The American fire service is made up of men and women who are equipped and willing to put their safety on the line to respond to fires in our homes. While you and I applaud their bravery, our greater responsibility in honoring their service and keeping them safe lies in taking the proper steps to prevent these fires from happening in the first place ... because Fire is Everyone's Fight.