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Residents Should Prepare Now for Colder Temperatures
Safety is the key to preparation for cold weather

CHARLESTON, W.Va. – As colder temperatures return to West Virginia, Department of Health and Human Resources Cabinet Secretary Karen L. Bowling and Department of Military Affairs and Public Safety Cabinet Secretary Joseph C. Thornton remind residents to schedule a professional inspection of all fuel-burning heating systems, including furnaces, boilers, fireplaces, wood stoves, water heaters, chimneys, flues and vents to help reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning and structure fires.

“The best way to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning is to have a professional inspection every year and install working carbon monoxide alarms in your home,” Bowling said. “Additionally, if residents smell gas inside or outside their homes, they should immediately call their local gas company.”

Common home heating safety tips include:

- **Fireplaces:** Have flues and chimneys inspected before each heating season for leakage and blockage by creosote or debris. Open the fireplace damper before lighting the fire and keep it open until the ashes are cool. Never close the damper if the ashes are still warm. An open damper may help prevent build-up of poisonous gases inside the home. Store fireplace ashes in a fire resistant container and cover it with a lid. Keep the container outdoors and away from combustibles.
- **Space heaters:** Use a space heater that has been tested to the latest safety standards and certified by a nationally-recognized testing laboratory. These heaters will have the most up-to-date safety features; older space heaters may not meet the newer safety standards. An unvented gas space heater that meets current safety standards will shut off if oxygen levels fall too low. Place the heater on a level, hard and nonflammable surface (such as ceramic tile floor), not on rugs or carpets or near bedding or drapes. Keep the heater at least three feet from bedding, drapes, furniture and other flammable materials. Keep children and pets away from space heaters. To prevent the risk of fire, NEVER leave a space heater on when you go to sleep or place a space heater close to any sleeping person. Turn the space heater off if you leave the area.
- **Charcoal grills:** Never burn charcoal inside of homes, vehicles, tents, or campers. Charcoal should never be used indoors, even if ventilation is provided.

Smoke detectors can also protect loved ones and save lives. Smoke alarms should be installed on every level of a home, particularly outside bedrooms and preferably inside them as well. State law requires that all property owners have working smoke alarms near sleeping areas.

Smoke alarms should be tested monthly, and their batteries replaced annually. The absence of smoke alarms, or detectors with their batteries removed, is a recurring factor in residential fires, according to the Office of the State Fire Marshal, which is part of the Department of Military Affairs and Public Safety.

“A helpful habit is replacing alarm batteries when you turn back your clocks for the end of Daylight Savings Time,” said Thornton, who noted that the clocks change this Sunday, Nov. 3.

Other safety steps include:

- **Develop and practice a home escape plan** that includes a route out of each room and a safe meeting place outside. Each family member should know how to call 9-1-1 once they're safe, and that they should **never** go back into a burning house;
- **Consider a fire sprinkler system**, which when used in conjunction with smoke alarms can result in survival rates of over 90 percent;
- **Stay in the kitchen when you are frying, grilling or broiling food.** Unattended cooking is a major cause of residential fires. Also keep flammable items, such as oven mitts and food packaging, away from stovetops.

Learn more about winter heating safety at www.cdc.gov/nceh/pressroom/2006/cowarning.htm or call your local health department.

Learn more about fire safety from the Office of the State Fire Marshal at <http://www.firemarshal.wv.gov> or from the National Fire Protection Association at <http://www.nfpa.org/>.

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