



WHERE THERE'S SMOKES, THERE'S FIRE

Smoking, cooking top causes of fires in Fargo-Moorhead

By Mike Nowatzki mnowatzki@forumcomm.com Fargo

Smoking materials were the top known cause of residential fires in Fargo during the past five years, and the percentage of fires that happened in apartments was notably higher in Fargo than in Moorhead during that time, statistics show. The Forum requested data related to fire causes and types of residential fires after an April 6 apartment fire in south Fargo that resulted in the death of 30-year-old Jesse Madson and his 42-year-old fiancée, Angela Wentz. Fire investigators determined the blaze was sparked by a cigarette that ignited nearby combustibles in the second-floor unit at 925 Page Drive.

Of the Fargo fires with a known cause from 2008 to 2012, smoking materials topped the list of causes, accounting for 64 of the 270 residential structure fires, or nearly 24 percent. Cooking materials were a close second, blamed for 62 fires. Electrical malfunction was the third most common cause at 9 percent, followed by open flame at 8 percent and appliance malfunction at 7 percent.

By comparison, smoking was blamed in only four of the 100 residential fires in Moorhead during that same time period, though Moorhead Fire Chief Rich Duysen said he believes that number should be higher. Changing habits

Part of the reasons cigarettes have caused so many fires in recent years is the growing reluctance, even among many smokers, to smoke inside.

Fargo Fire Marshal Norm Scott said smokers have changed their habits, with more stepping outside their homes or apartments to light up. That can lead to deck and balcony fires if they fail to use a proper container to dispose of smoldering cigarette butts, he said.

Fargo's often-windy weather also elevates the risk that a discarded cigarette butt will continue to burn and ignite nearby combustibles, such as a plastic flower pot or peat moss in a potted plant, he said.

Last year, Fargo firefighters responded to 20 smoking-related fires, marking the highest total since at least 2008 and prompting fire officials to repeatedly issue pleas for smokers to be more careful. Scott said they should discard spent cigarettes in a metal container or a receptacle specifically designed for cigarettes.

Plastic is a definite nono, he said.

Duysen, who was Moorhead's fire marshal for 10 years before being named chief in February 2012, said he believes the city's number of smoking-related fires over the past five years was likely closer to a dozen, but some of those may have been listed under other

categories in the National Fire Incident Reporting System.

(The departments varied slightly in how they reported data to The Forum, but they were similar enough for comparison purposes.)

Comprehensive fire statistics for the same five-year period weren't readily available from the West Fargo Fire Department. Fire Chief Roy Schatschneider said the department used a different fire reporting system than Fargo and Moorhead before all three agencies switched to New World, a \$3.8 million public safety dispatch and record management software system installed in March 2011, and West Fargo was unable to import its older data into the system.

Nationally, cooking was the leading cause of residential building fires from 2009 to 2011, accounting for 46 percent of fires, according to the U.S. Fire Administration. It also was the leading cause of fires in Moorhead, where 35 percent of fires in the past five years were attributed to cooking, compared with about 23 percent in Fargo.

Smoking-related fires accounted for only 2 percent of residential building fires nationally from 2008 to 2010, but they were among the leading causes of fire deaths, accounting for 14 percent of fire deaths in residential buildings, the Fire Administration reported.

Greater loss potential

Nearly 63 percent of Fargo's residential fires in the past five years occurred in multifamily units, mostly apartment buildings, compared with 43 percent in Moorhead. (The percentages include fires at college and university dormitories. Moorhead also listed one motel/hotel fire, but Fargo considers those commercial fires, so it wasn't included for the purposes of comparing residential fires.)

"The larger the structure, the more potential for greater losses," Scott said.

As an example, he cited the Galleria On 42nd blaze that severely damaged the 62-unit apartment building at 3700 42nd St. S. in Fargo and displaced 150 residents on Oct. 11, 2010. The building has since been razed and replaced.

The cause of the Galleria fire was officially listed as undetermined. A fire investigator said it started on a first-floor deck near a plastic coffee can used for disposing of cigarette butts, but no one would admit to smoking there.

As a result of that fire, the fire department and inspections department worked together to update the city's building code to require that noncombustible building materials be used within five feet of any balcony or deck on multifamily dwellings, Scott said. The change means vinyl siding can no longer be used around decks and balconies; it has to be steel siding or brick, he said.

Duysen said Moorhead follows Minnesota's building code in allowing vinyl siding around multifamily decks and balconies only if there's a fire suppression sprinkler head installed above it. Otherwise, noncombustible materials must be used, he said.

"So, essentially they're achieving the same thing in Fargo," he said.

More Fargo apartments

Fargo's higher percentage of apartment fires is likely attributable to its higher number of apartments, Scott and Duysen said, though U.S. Census Bureau data still suggests a disproportionately higher percentage of apartment fires in Fargo.

More than half of Fargo's housing units, 52.8 percent, were in multiunit structures from 2007 to 2011, according to the most recent Census Bureau estimates available.

Multi-unit housing made up a smaller percentage of the overall housing stock in West Fargo (28.1 percent) and Moorhead (31.7 percent) during that same time period.

The homeownership rate also was higher in Moorhead (62.9 percent) and West Fargo (68.9 percent) than in Fargo (45.4 percent) during that period.

Scott said the chances of a fire happening in a 36-unit versus a single-family dwelling might be higher simply because there are more people living in the structure, but he said there's nothing about apartment buildings themselves that makes them more susceptible to fires.

Duysen noted that, unlike in Fargo where fire inspectors examine common corridors of apartment buildings but not individual living units, Moorhead fire inspectors enter every unit with the landlord, trying to identify potential fire hazards and educating tenants about fire safety.

□Now, can I attribute that to lower fire numbers? It would be an assumption. I don't know,□ he said.

Duysen said he anticipates apartment fires will continue to account for a larger percentage of Moorhead's fires because of expansion in the rental sector. But all new apartment buildings must have fire suppression sprinklers, so the risk of major fires caused by smoking should be minimal, he said.

Causes undetermined

Fire investigators can usually determine where a fire started, but pinpointing the cause can be more challenging, Scott said.

The cause was listed as undetermined in 28 percent of Fargo's residential fires and in 25 percent of Moorhead's residential fires in the past five years.

□If you have an area that is burned quite a bit, it's sometimes difficult to determine what was at the scene of the fire that could have caused it,□ Scott said. In addition to physical evidence, witnesses also play a role in fire investigations. □We'll listen to all the comments from the person who was there ... and from what they say look at the scene and see if that was a possible cause,□ he said.

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The Galleria On 42nd blaze severely damaged the 62-unit apartment building at 3700 42nd St. S. in Fargo and displaced 150 residents on Oct. 11, 2010. The building has since been razed and replaced. The cause of the Galleria fire was officially listed as undetermined. A fire investigator said it started on a first-floor deck near a plastic coffee can used for disposing of cigarette butts, but no one would admit to smoking there. Forum file photo



Forum file photo An April 6 apartment fire at 925 Page Drive in south Fargo resulted in the death of 30-year-old Jesse Madson and his 42-year-old fiancée, Angela Wentz.