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For Immediate Release:
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Fire Chief Issues Cold Weather Fire Safety Warning

Fire officials issued a fire safety warning as we enter the first period of extremely cold weather this winter. “Sub-freezing temperatures dip this week will tax our heating and electrical systems as we try to stay warm, so a little caution can help you make you it safely through the extreme weather,” said Bellingham Fire Chief Steven Gentile.

Make Sure Smoke Alarms and CO Alarms are Working

“One of the simplest steps for safety you can take is to make sure your smoke and carbon monoxide alarms are working. They will give you the earliest possible warning that something is wrong so you can escape safely,” said Chief Gentile.

“Keep thermostats set at the lowest comfortable temperature as furnaces may struggle to keep the house warm; wear warm clothes and put an extra blanket on the bed,” said Gentile. “If you run out of oil, or lose power, consider going to the home of a friend or relative who has heat rather than relying on alternative heating sources,” he added.

Space Heaters

“Cold snaps like this is when we tend to see space heater fires and one of every four space heater fires in the past five years has caused a fire injury,” he said. “Space heaters need space, so use them in a 3-foot circle of safety, free of anything that can catch fire.” He added, “Space heaters are not designed to replace your central heating system, they are only designed to provide a little extra heat on a temporary basis. So be sure to turn them off when you leave room or go to bed at night.”

It is best to plug space heaters and other heat-generating appliances directly into the outlet. Overloaded extension cords cause many space heater fires. If you must use an extension cord, make sure it is rated for the same wattage as the appliance and use only one.

Wood, Coal and Pellet Stoves

“Already this winter heating season, Massachusetts has seen numerous serious fires from the improper disposal of ashes from fireplaces, wood and pellet stoves,” said Gentile. “A

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single ember can remain hot for days, so put ashes in a metal container with a lid away from the house, the garage, the deck,” he added. Several recent fires started with ashes put into plastic bags, cardboard boxes, and plastic trash bins, in the garage, or under the deck.

“Don’t over fire your woodstove. An overtaxed woodstove can easily start a chimney fire taking advantage of creosote build-up or minor cracks in the flue or causing a breakdown in the chimney liner,” said Gentile. Heating appliances are the leading cause of carbon monoxide in the home and the risk increases when they are working harder. For more information go to www.mass.gov/keepwarmkeepsafe.

Preventive Maintenance

It’s never too late to have a licensed professional clean and inspect your furnace or chimney. A professional can clean the chimney of creosote, and check for cracked or broken mortar. An efficiently running furnace is cheaper to run. Heating equipment is the leading cause of carbon monoxide in the home.

Prevent Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

“Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning is a great risk at times like these,” said Gentile. “Using propane or charcoal grills or generators inside the garage – even with the door open – poses a serious risk of CO poisoning,” he warned. For the same reason, never use a gas oven for heat.

Generator Safety

Use generators outdoors away from windows, doors and vents with the exhaust pointed away from the home. Don’t use them inside the garage, basement or partially enclosed areas no matter how well ventilated. Never plug a generator into a wall outlet. This practice known as “backfeeding” can cause an electrocution risk to utility workers and others served by the same transformer. Plug appliances directly into the generator or use a heavy-duty outdoor-rated extension cord. Make sure the entire cord is free of cuts or tears and plug has all three prongs including the grounding pin. Fire officials recommend placing the container on the ground to avoid any static electrical charge igniting vapors.

Gasoline should be stored outside the home in small quantities in approved containers. Remember to allow equipment to cool before refueling to prevent vapors from ignited.

Clear Snow from Furnace and Dryer Vents

Keep outside furnace, hot water and dryer vents clear of drifting snow, to prevent flue gases from backing up into the home and creating a carbon monoxide hazard.

Clear Snow from Vehicle Tailpipes

Two winters ago, two children from Boston died from carbon monoxide while sitting inside running vehicles where the tailpipe was clogged with snow. Doctors from the Boston Public Health Commission have created an educational video on CO poisoning that addresses this particular risk. (<http://youtu.be/7Yy9zXsaeCA>).

Use Flashlights and Battery-Operated Candles

Use flashlights and battery-operated candles for safety. If you must use flame candles, remember to burn them inside a one-foot circle of safety free of anything that can burn. Place them on a non-combustible surface or in the sink; blow them out when you leave the room or go to bed; and use jar candles or place a globe over stick candles. Keep pets and children away from candles.

Consider Going to a Shelter to Charge Up Cell Phones for Emergency Calls

Many people may lose the ability to make emergency calls when cell phone batteries and the battery-backup for fiber optic telephone/cable/Internet services become depleted. “I would urge people without lights and heat to consider staying with friends and family have power or go to an emergency shelter for a short while, even if it’s just to charge up cell phones, get a hot meal and warm up,” Gentile said. “

Prevent Freezing Pipes

Let water drip a trickle to prevent pipes from freezing and open cupboards under sinks to let heat circulate around the pipes.

For more information on winter heating safety go to <http://www.mass.gov/keepwarmkeepsafe>.