



Washington  
**PUBLIC FIRE EDUCATORS**  
*"Teaching for a Safer Tomorrow"*

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*Position Statement*  
**SMOKE ALARMS/DETECTORS**

*In residential settings, smoke alarms/detectors are the single most important factor in saving lives from fire.*

**BACKGROUND**

*The vast majority of fire deaths occur in residential settings. Smoke inhalation rather than burns causes most of these deaths. Smoke contains dangerous chemicals that can lull occupants into a deeper sleep or lead to confusion. This disorientation can seriously compromise the occupants' abilities to escape safely. Smoke alarms/detectors provide early warning of fire and allow occupants the time to escape. However, many devices fail to activate in a fire due to poor or non-existent maintenance. Therefore, Washington Public Fire Educators makes the following recommendations:*

**VITAL POINTS**

- *Install and maintain a smoke alarm/detector on each level of the home.*
- *Install and maintain a smoke alarm/detector in each sleeping area.*
- *If the home is equipped with hard-wired smoke alarm/detectors, check to ensure the device has a **battery back-up** for protection during power outages.*
- *Follow the **manufacturer's recommendations on placement**. Read the instructions thoroughly to ensure proper placement away from walls, heat registers, and other air displacement devices.*
- *Test smoke alarms/detectors on a monthly basis.*
- *Replace smoke alarm/detector batteries once a year. A good time to change batteries is when clocks are changed back in the fall, or when the device is "chirping" continuously – often an indication that the battery needs to be changed.*
- *Vacuum and/or dust smoke alarms/detectors at least once each year.*
- *Replace smoke alarms/detectors every ten years.*
- *Consider installing ten-year lithium battery operated smoke alarms.*

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/REFERENCES**

*Washington State Requirements for All Homes: The Uniform Building Code has required smoke alarms/detectors in all dwellings since the 1973 edition of the code. Currently, all new dwellings are required to have hard-wired, interconnected smoke detectors with battery back-up on each level of the home as well as in each bedroom.*

*Washington State Requirements for Rentals: In homes and apartments used as rentals, the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) Section 212-10-045, Item 2 states: "It is the responsibility of the owner of each existing building, mobile home or factory-built housing to install smoke detection devices within each dwelling unit occupied by persons other than the owner." Item 3 states: "It is the responsibility of the owner of each new or existing building, mobile home or factory-built housing,*

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*containing dwelling units occupied by persons other than the owner, to inspect and test all smoke detection devices at the time of vacancy and make the necessary repairs or replacements to insure that the smoke detection devices are operational prior to re-occupancy, and to instruct the occupants of the purpose, operation and maintenance of the smoke detection devices(s)."*

*WAC 212-10-050 states: "It is the responsibility of the occupant of all new or existing dwelling units, owned by other than the occupant, to maintain and test all smoke detection devices installed within the dwelling unit by the owner. Actual costs of maintenance, repair or replacement of smoke detection devices shall be as agreed beforehand by the occupant and owner. However, failure of the owner to abide by the terms of any such agreement does not relieve the occupant to the penalty provisions of WAC 212-10-050."*

*RCW 59.18.060, as amended in 2002, requires that all landlords "provide a written notice to tenants disclosing fire safety and protection information ... The notice must be signed by the landlord or the landlord's agent and tenant with copies provided to both parties ... not later than January 1, 2004. The notice must include the following: (i) whether the smoke detection device is hard-wired or battery-operated..."*

***General information:***

- [www.nfpa.org](http://www.nfpa.org)
- [www.firesafehome.org/smokealarms.htm](http://www.firesafehome.org/smokealarms.htm)
- [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov) (search for documents relating to smoke alarms/detectors)
- [www.usfa.fema.gov/dhtml/public/alarms.cfm](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/dhtml/public/alarms.cfm)

***Smoke alarm/detector operation:***

- [www.howstuffworks.com/smoke.htm](http://www.howstuffworks.com/smoke.htm)