

# Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

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November 21, 2011

## “Wood Burning Stove and Fireplace Safety”



As temperatures drop, owners of wood burning stoves and fireplaces are bringing in wood for fuel to provide heat or supplement other heat sources in their homes and shops.

City of Norfolk Fire Chief Scott Cordes offers safety tips for those who are burning wood or pellets in their fireplaces and wood burning stoves.

“First of all, if you’re thinking of installing a heat auxiliary device in your home, make sure to follow the manufacturers’ directions and the local building code for its proper installation, use, and maintenance,” Cordes said.

He recommended allowing a clearance of at least 36" on all sides of the stove to prevent scorching or possible fire. All flue pipe should be well insulated where it passes through a wall or roof. The chimney should extend at least three feet above the highest point of the roof and should always be kept clean and in good repair.

“If you have an existing fireplace make sure you check the chimney and flue so that it’s clear of

creosote before you start any fire,” Cordes said.

Chimney fires are caused when creosote, a normal by-product of burning wood, collects on the inside of the chimney and is ignited. The causes of creosote buildup are flue temperatures below 250 degrees. Slow burning, smoldering fires and burning unseasoned soft wood also causes creosote accumulation.

“The buildup of ashes or creosote in the flue can accumulate over time and catch fire inside of the chimney. Creosote buildup can be eliminated by maintaining a hot fire with dry seasoned wood,” Cordes said.

Cordes recommended contacting a professional chimney sweep to inspect and clean all flue pipes prior to the lighting the first fire of the season. The flue should then be periodically inspected by the homeowner periodically through the cold months.

A shield should be placed around any wood burning apparatus to prevent sparks from flying out. Glass grates enclosing the front of the fireplace are effective in keeping sparks from flying as are wire mesh grates.

A non-combustible surface should surround the area around the wood burning stove or fireplace preventing any sparks that do escape from causing a fire. All decorations, debris and flammable materials should be kept away from the area. Fire resistant materials should also be used on the walls around a wood stove.

Smoke detectors are a must in any home, especially in those that use fire as a heat source. Cordes recommended that a functioning fire extinguisher be kept close by with all family members trained in its proper use.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Administration, heating fires account for 36% of residential home fires in rural areas every year. Many of those fires occur when the resident is not home. Cordes advised to extinguish the fire before leaving your home or going to bed.

Cordes also said it's best to store firewood at least 30 feet away from your home. Cover the chimney with a spark arrestor and keep the roof of your home clear of leaves, pine needles or other debris that might catch fire from any spark that does fly out the chimney.

Never use flammable liquids to start a fire or burn cardboard boxes, trash or debris in a fireplace. According to FEMA, the best way to build a fire is to stack dry hardwood at the back on a metal supporting grate. Use a small amount of paper and kindling to get fire started with the flue wide open. Once the wood has started burning adjust the flue.

"It's estimated that one third of Americans use fuel fired appliances like fireplaces and wood stoves for their heat. It's imperative that homeowners who use these appliances understand the additional responsibility and upkeep it takes to prevent an accidental fire," Cordes said.

For more information and a brochure on fireplace and wood burning stove safety, contact the Norfolk Fire Department at 844.2050.