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STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OP-ED

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## Alaskans Need to Practice Fire Prevention More than Ever

*Increased time at home can be spent keeping your family safe.*

By: Dir. Richard Boothby, Alaska State Fire Marshal

Like many other Alaskans and people around the world, I've been watching the events of COVID-19 play out. As time moves on and the virus spreads, it has started major changes to work, school, entertainment, and to our everyday lives. We are now physically isolating at home. We now telework and our children are doing their schoolwork alongside us. With these changes, we are trying to slow down the spread of the virus and to keep our families safe. As the Alaska State Fire Marshal, I am concerned now that we are in our homes much more than usual, there is a risk that is growing.

What many people fail to consider is that nearly all of Alaska's fire fatalities occur in the home. In 2019, Alaska had 18 fire deaths, 16 of which were in residential type occupancies. In 2020, just this week, Alaska had its first two fire fatalities in separate incidents. Both of the fire fatalities occurred in residential dwellings. As someone who has worked in the firefighting industry for most of my adult life, I can tell you with certainty that fire deaths in the home can usually be prevented.

I encourage Alaskans to take the news of these deaths as a call to action. I implore you to walk through your home with your family members to ensure everyone understands fire hazards and how they can be mitigated. Take the time to test your smoke alarms, carbon monoxide alarms and fire extinguishers (all homes should have these items), have a plan of what to do in case of a fire and practice a fire drill with your family so everyone understands what to do and where to meet in case of an emergency. When doing your home inspections, consider using these checklists found on FEMA's website:

[https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/fief/protect\\_everyone\\_from\\_fire.pdf](https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/fief/protect_everyone_from_fire.pdf)

[https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/fief/keep\\_your\\_home\\_safe.pdf](https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/fief/keep_your_home_safe.pdf)

We are still experiencing winter conditions around most of the state and many Alaskans are still using wood stoves and using space heaters. Ensure that there is at least 36 inches of clearance between all heating appliances and combustible materials. Also take the time to have proper maintenance and cleaning of heating equipment completed per manufacture recommendations.

As the State Fire Marshal, I am asking Alaskans to partner with us. Take the time, which we now all have, to further protect yourself and your family. Do a home safety inspection. A lot of good fire-safe information can be found at <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/prevention/outreach/>, <http://www.sparky.org/>, and <https://dps.alaska.gov/Fire/Home>.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the State Fire Marshal's Office will remain open for business. The deputy fire marshals will still respond to fires and to complaints, plan reviewers will be completing reviews and answering questions by phone. fire standards and training will be providing educational materials and responding to inquiries.

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Dir. Rich Boothby is the Alaska State Fire Marshal and Director of the Division of Fire and Life Safety for the Department of Public Safety. He is a life-long Alaskan and has served Alaskans for more than 35 years as a firefighter, fire preventions specialist and fire investigator.



**Fire is FAST! There is little time!**

In less than 30 seconds a small flame can get completely out of control and turn into a major fire. It only takes minutes for thick black smoke to fill a house. In minutes, a house can be engulfed in flames. If you wake up to a fire, you won't have time to grab valuables because fire spreads too quickly and the smoke is too thick. There is only time to escape.

**Fire is HOT! Heat is more threatening than flames.**

A fire's heat alone can kill. Room temperatures in a fire can be 100 degrees at floor level and rise to 600 degrees at eye level. Inhaling this super-hot air will scorch your lungs. This heat can melt clothes to your skin. In five minutes, a room can get so hot that everything in it ignites at once: this is called flashover.

**Fire is DARK! Fire isn't bright, it's pitch black.**

Fire starts bright, but quickly produces black smoke and complete darkness. If you wake up to a fire you may be blinded, disoriented and unable to find your way around the home you've lived in for years.

**Fire is DEADLY! Smoke and toxic gases kill more people than flames do.**

Fire uses up the oxygen you need and produces smoke and poisonous gases that kill. Breathing even small amounts of smoke and toxic gases can make you drowsy, disoriented and short of breath. The odorless, colorless fumes can lull you into a deep sleep before the flames reach your door. You may not wake up in time to escape.