

Dept. of Safety and Professional Services: Annual Fire Prevention Week programming shifts to virtual delivery, emphasizes safety at home

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MADISON, Wis. – No strangers to changing circumstances, fire fighters are trained to quickly reassess as conditions shift. So when it became clear that Wisconsin would still be in the throes of the pandemic for [Fire Prevention Week™](#), fire departments did just that: they surveyed the scene and adjusted.

Fire Prevention Week runs from October 4 through October 10. The annual fire station open houses are cancelled, and the field trips and girl scout troop visits are on hold but the educational programming that forms the foundation of community fire safety will go on—it is just going online.

For example, [Sun Prairie Fire & Rescue](#) will host a week-long virtual open house on its Facebook page, and Sun Prairie's community TV station KSUN will present daily fire prevention segments, which are also available to stream on demand, all week. "We owe it to our residents to be in the forefront of this safety initiative," said Chief Christopher Garrison.

Like Sun Prairie Fire & Rescue, fire departments throughout Wisconsin are promoting virtual open houses, social media platforms, and other digital content aimed at educating the public and raising awareness about the importance of fire safety efforts.

Captain Kenny Asselin leads fire prevention efforts for the [West Bend Fire Department](#). He says his department uses multiple social media platforms year-

round to alert his community to potential fire risks, promote engagement opportunities with the department, and raise fire prevention awareness in general. He is also in regular contact with local media to share important trends, cautions, events, and tips.

Asselin always looks forward to Fire Prevention Week as an opportunity to partner with schools and community organizations that help reinforce fire safety messaging. While some of that can still happen online, Asselin points out that there are drawbacks. Some learning opportunities, like regular school fire drills, do not translate well to virtual platforms, and some services, such as smoke detector installation and fire safety audits for the elderly, may not happen until the pandemic subsides.

“The fire service as a whole has made pretty good strides in reducing injury and death from fire, and much of that is because of education and outreach—teaching people about risks and how to keep themselves safe,” Asselin said. “Stop, drop, and roll. Call 911. Those are things firefighters taught us. I am extremely worried about the possible increase in injuries and death from fires over time because of the lost learning opportunities.”

Brad Johnson is the fire prevention program section chief for the Department of Safety and Professional Services, the agency that administers the state fire code and Wisconsin’s fire prevention program. Johnson says fire prevention education and outreach can help individuals reduce risk and stop fires before they have a chance to start, which is good not only for communities but also for fire crews—especially now.

“Fire departments have gone to great lengths to keep their crews healthy and safe,” Johnson said. “Any call could expose firefighters to COVID-19 and introduce it to the entire department. That could leave stations under-staffed and could put entire communities at risk.”

Johnson says fire prevention education is an ongoing need, as risks emerge and evolve with new materials or products and with changes to our daily habits and routines. For example, Johnson says his team is watching state data closely to see whether the incidence of cooking fires and cooking injuries increase as more people spend more time and eat more meals at home. Asselin says anecdotal evidence from fire departments and hospital burn units suggest that is the case, which explains why this year’s Fire Prevention Week theme focuses on safe cooking

practices.

Johnson also expects some new cold weather threats this year. With indoor spaces still presenting risks for COVID exposure, people may try to extend their outdoor activities into the late fall and winter by heating garages and outdoor spaces. This, Johnson says, could lead to related calls for fires, smoke inhalation, and carbon monoxide poisoning from improper use of outdoor space heaters.

“They are safe products if used properly,” Johnson says. “Just be sure to read directions.”

Johnson emphasizes that while fire fighters are trained and skilled at extinguishing fires, the goal—all year long—is always to prevent fires in the first place. It prevents injury, it minimizes property damage, and it keeps fire fighters safe.

In addition to administering the state fire code, the Department of Safety and Professional Services issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, and maintains the award-winning Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to stem excessive opioid prescribing. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.