

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Fire Prevention Week

Exactly a year ago this weekend, I added new adventure to my career in public life. I served as a volunteer in a simulated house fire as part of the East Longmeadow fire department's open house program. That was more on-the-job excitement than I expected when I became a State Representative. This is what happened at the fire station.

The open house topped off National Fire Prevention Week, an annual tradition that I remember from my own school days. But the level of education has grown exponentially between then and now. My classmates and I learned not to tamper with the fuse box; today's children lined up for a chance to put out a fire with a home fire extinguisher. Only the enthusiastic teaching by firefighters has remained constant over the years. These are some of the highlights of a modern demonstration.

In a refrain that was repeated again and again, Chief Robert Wallace stressed the importance of smoke and heat detectors as an early warning system. He talked of proper placement, offering house calls by the department to recommend appropriate locations for detectors. He stressed the importance of checking for active batteries and further suggested changing those batteries annually, just to be sure. One fireman said he changes home batteries for fire prevention week. Another proposed replacing old batteries when you change clocks for daylight savings time.

The staff recommends home fire extinguisher for small kitchen fires, warning residents to evacuate and call for help if the fire persists for more than 30 seconds. Children took turns aiming a household extinguisher, showing everyone in the crowd how quickly the demonstration flames could be subdued.

Then it was time for the sprinkler demonstration. When only three volunteers came forward to experience the fire up close, the Chief invited me to be the fourth. We were secured in a trailer (supplied for the purpose by the Federal Emergency Management Agency) furnished as a kitchen and outfitted with home sprinklers. Firemen then set fire to newspapers in a wastebasket in our little house. By the time the fire had burned for 30 seconds, a ceiling temperature of 135° activated the sprinkler which then doused the flames. The smoke alarms sounded even before the sprinkler activated, proving the assertion of the firemen that they are the first line of defense.

Aerial ladders, the Jaws of Life and the arson-sniffing dog provided both entertainment and instruction for the children and families who spent the beautiful autumn afternoon at the fire station. Popcorn and cookies added to the festivities, and we all learned some important lessons about fire safety. If I were building a home today, sprinklers would be part of the design. Since that is not the case, I have adopted the fire prevention measures advocated by the firemen. After the demonstration, I asked my hometown fire department to check my home to be sure my detectors were appropriately placed. The inspector recommended two additional units. As Fire Prevention Week returns again this year, the hazard of fire is still with us. I hope the public focus of another publicity-filled week will help you make your home ready for an unexpected fire.