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## FROM THE HEALTH OFFICE JANUARY 2009

### Child Safety: The Importance of Smoke Detectors and Carbon Monoxide Detectors

Now that the winter is in full gear and the holiday season has passed we want to help you to have a happy and safe New Year. There has been much talk in the news recently regarding tragedies that have occurred and could have been prevented if smoke detectors or carbon monoxide detectors were in place. Approximately 93% of homes have smoke alarms, but only 15% of homes have carbon monoxide detectors. We would like to expand on this and alert you to safety tips and signs and symptoms to be aware of to keep you and your family safe.

Simply put, smoke detectors save lives. Sixty five percent of home fire deaths occur in homes with no smoke detectors at all or smoke detectors that do not work. Smoke is sneaky. It is silent and contains poisonous gases. You cannot smell it when you are asleep. Smoke gets hot very, very fast. Fire spreads quickly, and smoke detectors provide you with the warning to give you time to get out.

So how can you protect yourself and your family?? Be prepared! There are three simple steps to take now before fire strikes. First, install smoke detectors on all levels of your home. Second, test them monthly to make sure they are working. Make sure the batteries are in working order. Push the "test" button so everyone in the home knows the sound of the alarm. Thirdly, plan and practice fire drills in your home.

Fire drills are an important part of the plan. Talk with you family about the best ways to get out quickly. Have a meeting place outside and in front of your home. If you live in an apartment building, be aware of all the exits and the quickest way to get out. Each apartment building should have a fire evacuation plan – make sure you read it and provide the information to your family. Make sure you practice fire drills twice a year so the information stays fresh in everyone's mind.

Just as smoke is silent, so is carbon monoxide. Carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden death and illness. Carbon monoxide poisoning occurs because blood cells pick up carbon monoxide more quickly than they pick up oxygen. If there is a lot of carbon monoxide in the air, the body may replace oxygen in the blood with carbon monoxide. This blocks oxygen from circulating throughout the body which can damage tissues and result in death. Each year, carbon monoxide is responsible for 400 deaths, 20,000 emergency room visits and 400 hospitalizations in the United States.

What causes the build up of carbon monoxide in your home? Carbon monoxide is produced whenever any fuel is burned. If appliances are working properly, the amount produced is not hazardous. However, if appliances are not working properly or are used incorrectly, dangerous levels of carbon monoxide can build up. In addition, if cars are left idling in the

garage (whether the doors are open or closed) and the garage is attached to your home, carbon monoxide can seep in under the door and accumulate.

There are several ways to protect yourself and your family. First and foremost, make sure you have carbon monoxide detectors on each level of your home. Make sure all fuel burning appliances as well as fireplaces and wood stoves are inspected annually. Be aware of the signs and symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning. They include mild symptoms such as shortness of breath, mild nausea and mild headaches. At moderate levels you may experience severe headaches, dizziness, mental confusion, nausea and faintness. Many of these symptoms mimic those of the flu, food poisoning or illness. Think carbon monoxide poisoning if several family members develop similar symptoms in a short period of time. It is always wise to play it safe.

What do you do if you think you have symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning or if your carbon monoxide detectors go off? Quickly, open doors and windows, and leave the house. Call 911, and go to the nearest hospital emergency room for evaluation. In addition, have the fire department check your home for levels of carbon monoxide.

It is not our goal to alarm you but to make you aware of hazards that are lurking in your home and can be avoided. We hope these tips keep you safe throughout the year.

The Health Services Department wishes you a happy, healthy, and safe New Year.

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