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Smoke detectors called lifesavers, and they're free

By Jeff Long
Tribune staff reporter

The tragic thread running through fires that have killed 29 people in Chicago this year, highlighted again by the deaths of six children early Sunday in Rogers Park, is that none of the homes and apartments where they lived had smoke detectors that worked, fire officials said.

"Every single one," said Chicago Fire Commissioner Raymond Orozco, adding that the statistic does not surprise him.

Landlord Jay Johnson said that there were working hard-wired smoke detectors in the third-floor apartment when the family moved in about eight years ago and that the building passed a city inspection this summer. Johnson said he doesn't know if the inspectors looked at the family's unit.

But Orozco and other fire officials said they found no smoke detectors in the apartment early Sunday morning. What happened to them is unclear.

The deadly fire underscores the importance of smoke detectors, Orozco said. Not only do they save lives, they can shorten

by crucial minutes the time before firefighters are called.

About half the deaths this year were in units that had no smoke detectors at all, Orozco said. The other half were in units where the detectors did not work, often because they had no batteries, he said.

"If the batteries went out in someone's remote control, how long would that last?" he said in an interview Sunday afternoon. "But they won't spend a dollar on a 9-volt battery."

Firefighters found no smoke detectors in the third-floor apartment in the 7700 block of North Marshfield Avenue where the children, ages 3 to 14, died in a fire that began about 12:30 a.m., Orozco said.

Spreading the word about smoke detectors has become a priority in Orozco's three months as fire commissioner.

But it's a priority for any firefighter who has waded through smoke and flame and found a body, he said. "It's not just me," Orozco said. "As I sat there at 1 o'clock in the morning looking at the faces of the firefighters and paramedics, we all have the same frustration."



Firefighters load up with smoke detectors to give away Sunday near where a fire killed six children. Officials said there were no detectors in any of the city homes where fires killed 29 this year.

Tribune photo by José Moré

"Especially when there are children involved," said District Fire Chief George Lynch. "Many firemen have kids. It's very hard on them. Smoke detectors cost maybe \$5."

Anyone can get a free smoke detector at a local fire station. More than 500 have been given away this year, officials said.

At the fire station in the 2300 block of West Foster Avenue, a filing cabinet's top drawer holds seven boxed smoke detectors that have been free since May. A logbook showed one person has picked up a free one, in June.

City code requires smoke detectors within 15 feet of all rooms used for sleeping. It's illegal to remove the battery from a smoke detector, a violation that could result in a \$300 to \$1,000 per day fine or confinement for no more than 6 months.

Absence of smoke detectors is a violation of the building code and could yield a fine of \$300 to \$1,000 a day.

But the challenge of getting people to keep functioning detectors is constant.

About 9:30 a.m. Sunday, firefighters at the Kedzie Avenue

station went to a fire at a seven-story building in the 6300 block of North Winthrop Avenue where there were no working detectors, firefighters said.

Four Chicago police officers rescued and escorted several residents out of the building, including two who were physically disabled.

The officers had to be treated for smoke inhalation.

Tribune staff reporters Ted Gregory and Josh Noel contributed to this report.

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