

Selected Published Incidents Involving Clothes Dryers

**One-Stop Data Shop
Fire Analysis and Research Division
National Fire Protection Association**

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This report includes articles from NFPA publications about fires involving clothes dryers. Included are short articles from the “Firewatch” or “Bi-monthly” columns in *NFPA Journal* or its predecessor *Fire Journal* and incidents from either the large-loss fires report or catastrophic fires report. If available, investigation reports or NFPA Alert Bulletins are included and provide detailed information about the fires.

It is important to remember that this is anecdotal information. Anecdotes show what can happen; they are not a source to learn about what typically occurs.

NFPA’s Fire Incident Data Organization (FIDO) identifies significant fires through a clipping service, the Internet and other sources. Additional information is obtained from the fire service and federal and state agencies. FIDO is the source for articles published in the “Firewatch” column of the *NFPA Journal* and many of the articles in this report.

For more information about the National Fire Protection Association, visit www.nfpa.org or call 617-770-3000. To learn more about the One-Stop Data Shop go to www.nfpa.org/osds or call 617-984-7443.

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Smoke alarm alerts occupant, Massachusetts

An operating smoke alarm in a single-family house being used as a group home alerted an occupant to a fire in the basement laundry room. He used a fire extinguisher in an effort to control the fire, but flames spread through a pipe chase to other parts of the home.

In accordance with state law, the two-story, split-level, wood-frame house, which contained 2,344 square feet (218 square meters), had local smoke alarms on all floors, but they were not connected to a monitored fire alarm system. Fire officials said that central station monitoring or a fire department connection would have allowed firefighters to attack the fire earlier and limit fire spread. There were no sprinklers.

A resident had put a load of laundry in an electric dryer and gone to take a shower. While he was in the bathroom, he heard a smoke alarm operating and went to investigate after he finished his shower. Finding smoke and flames coming from the back of the dryer, the man tried unsuccessfully to extinguish the fire before leaving the building. A neighbor called 911 at 11:30 a.m.

The fire department, arriving with a ladder company and two engines, found that the fire had spread to the home's upper floors through a pipe chase and into the attic. Investigators determined that the dryer's electric motor had malfunctioned and ignited the wiring insulation on the unit.

Damage to the house and its contents, together valued at \$215,000, was estimated at \$90,000. There were no injuries.

Kenneth J. Tremblay, 2009, Firewatch, NFPA Journal, May/June, 39-40.

Dryer Fire Kills Two, North Carolina

A fire that started in an electric dryer in the laundry room of a single-story, single-family house killed a bedridden 77-year-old woman and her 36-year-old granddaughter.

The wood-frame house, which measured 46 feet by 30 feet (14 meters by 9 meters), had smoke alarms in the hallway and the den, which operated as designed. There were no sprinklers in the dwelling.

The younger woman discovered the fire around 1:00 p.m. when she got out of the shower and smelled smoke. After discovering that the dryer was on fire, she called 911 and tried to get her grandmother out the house by dragging her across the floor and into the hallway. When fire conditions worsened, she covered her grandmother with her body to protect her. Firefighters entering the house found the two women in the hallway. The younger woman was pronounced dead at the scene. Her grandmother was still alive but died of her injuries hours later.

Investigators determined that the dryer's electric heating element ignited the clothes in the unit. The dryer vent was on the windward side of the house, and winds of 28 miles (45

kilometers) per hour, gusting up to 35 miles (56 kilometers) per hour, swept the fire through the house. A window the young woman broke while trying to escape was also on the windward side of the house.

The house, which was valued at \$100,000, and its contents, valued at \$50,000, were destroyed.

Kenneth J. Tremblay, 2008, Firewatch, NFPA Journal, May/June, 26-28.

Unattended Dryer Fire Kills Three, Tennessee

A 23-year-old woman, 27-year-old woman, and a one-year old girl died in a fire that started on the porch of their single-family home. Four other occupants, woken by the screams of a neighbor, managed to escape.

The single story, wood-frame house, which was 55 feet (17 meters) long and 25 feet (8 meters) wide, had a brick exterior and a wooden roof covered with asphalt shingles. There were no sprinklers, and the battery was missing from the home's smoke alarm.

Firefighters responding to a 911 call from a passerby at 2:45 a.m. found heavy fire coming from two sides of the building and heavy smoke throughout. Told that occupants were trapped inside, they advanced a hose line toward the rear of the house where the main body of fire was located. They found the three victims during extinguishment.

Investigators determined that a clothes dryer on the unenclosed rear porch started the deadly blaze. One of the surviving occupants reported that clothes had been put in the dryer at about 10:00 p.m. that evening. Because the temperature was in the teens, however, the dryer was apparently unable to maintain a sufficient drying heat and ran non-stop until the heat ignited lint built up behind and under the machine. Once ignited, the fire spread up to the exterior of the dwelling and into the house through a soffit, where it ignited ceiling joists and roof rafters.

The two women were found in their bedrooms. One appeared to have opened her bedroom door and faced fire and smoke immediately. The other was trying to leave her bedroom with the child using a secondary exit that was partially blocked by furniture on the other side.

The house, valued at \$66,000, sustained damages estimated at \$52,800. Its contents, valued at \$25,000, sustained damages of \$20,000.

Kenneth J. Tremblay, 2006, Firewatch, NFPA Journal, November/December, 24.

Two Die in Fire Caused by Clothes Dryer, Tennessee

A 55-year-old handicapped woman and a 50-year-old woman were fatally injured in a fire that started when the clothes dryer in their rented single-family home malfunctioned. The wood-frame house, which had an asphalt roof, was not sprinklered.

One of the occupants awoke at 8:35 a.m. to the smell of smoke and telephoned the fire department. After the fire was extinguished, investigators determined that the dryer's motor malfunctioned, causing clothing and carpeting to overheat and ignite. The fire then spread up a wall, across the ceiling, and up an open stairwell to the attic, where it traveled the length of the house above the living areas.

The handicapped woman died at the scene. The other woman suffered burns and smoke inhalation when she tried to rescue her roommate and died at the hospital.

The house, valued at \$55,000, and its contents, valued at \$10,000, were destroyed.

Kenneth J. Tremblay, 2006, Firewatch, NFPA Journal, September/ October, 28.