



# Homeward Bound

## *Fire Safety Groups Unite to Fight State's Home Fire Problem*

**By Fred Durso, Jr., Communications Manager, Fire Sprinkler Initiative, NFPA**

**W**hen asked to comment on Florida's home fires, Wendy Niles puts it bluntly: "We're losing the battle. We still have fire deaths that are not going away. Nothing seems to be working."

Niles, division chief and fire marshal for the Lake Mary Fire Department, backs up her statements with facts. Between 2005 and 2014 in Florida, there were approximately 230,000 home fires that resulted in 70 percent of Florida's fire deaths. These fires also caused \$2.5 billion in property damage.

Fire sprinklers, which have significantly decreased the horrors of fire in other buildings—hotels, universities, and nightclubs, to name a few—have not made their way into many of Florida's one- and two-family homes. (Fire sprinklers in new homes are a requirement in all model building codes.) This reality perplexes Niles, since home fire sprinklers can

reduce the risk of dying in home fires by 80 percent, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). "Fire sprinklers are the solution," she says.

Now co-chair for the newly formed Florida Fire Sprinkler Coalition, Niles and others aim to promote this solution statewide. A strictly educational endeavor, the coalition is comprised of key fire safety groups underscoring the ease and affordability of fire sprinkler installation in new homes to other stakeholder groups and the public. If unable to get sprinkler requirements passed statewide, the end goal, says Niles, is to at least have homeowners ask for them.

This educational boost follows recent efforts by sprinkler opponents to prevent installations in new homes. For instance, the town of Estero, Florida, passed an ordinance in 2015 to sprinkler its new homes—only to repeal it

earlier this year after a lawsuit was filed by two homebuilding groups. Florida's jurisdictions are allowed to adopt a sprinkler ordinance after conducting a cost-benefit analysis on the requirement. While the ordinance's opponents claimed fire sprinklers would skyrocket home prices, Estero's own analysis of installation costs placed it at pennies above the national average of \$1.35 per sprinklered square foot.

Countering sprinkler myths—particularly the issue of installation cost—is an area where the Florida Fire Sprinkler Coalition can excel, says Niles. "The coalition allows different groups to work together," she says. "It allows members of each of these associations an avenue to get together and focus on home fire sprinklers. We can hit [these issues] from different angles."

Already on board for this cause is the

Florida Fire Chiefs' Association, Florida Fire Marshals and Inspectors Association, the International Fire Marshals Association, the National Fire Sprinkler Association, the American Fire Sprinkler Association, the Florida Professional Firefighters Association, and NFPA.

Showing its support, NFPA recently awarded the coalition a \$10,000 grant to fund educational efforts in 2016. The grant was one of 15 awarded by NFPA's Fire Sprinkler Initiative, a campaign that offers safety advocates online and on-the-ground support to help them advocate for home fire sprinklers. In addition to Florida, NFPA lends its assistance to nearly 30 other state sprinkler coalitions. "Throughout North America, we're seeing more and more support for fire sprinklers in new homes thanks to localized, grassroots efforts," says Lorraine Carli, NFPA vice president of Outreach and Advocacy. "With NFPA's support, sprinkler coalitions have the power to reach key decision makers and local residents in a way that highlights sprinklers as a life-saving necessity in their new homes and the single-most powerful way to reduce the fire problem for generations to come."

The NFPA grant has partially funded the launch of the coalition's new education contest, which tasks the state's safety advocates with crafting a program or media campaign promoting home fire sprinklers. The winner will receive up to \$1,000 in prizes.

"We want people to think outside the box," says Niles. "How can we effectively get the message throughout the state about home fire sprinklers and why people should have them? There are so many people we need to educate—the fire service, builders, the public, water purveyors—on why sprinklers are so important."

Florida coalition members are looking to embrace nonconventional education and foresee it leading to safer homes in Florida. "Because of the coalition, we have a unique opportunity to make a difference in every community, with every family," says Kingman Schuldt, co-chair of the Florida coalition and fire chief of the Greater Naples Fire Rescue District. "In my 34 years of professional experience, I have seldom seen an initiative bring together so many professionals working cooperatively on a common goal. I have never been more excited to support an initiative that can impact our communities in such a positive manner."

For more information on the Florida Fire Sprinkler Coalition and NFPA's Fire Sprinkler Initiative, please visit the website at [FireSprinklerInitiative.org/Florida](http://FireSprinklerInitiative.org/Florida).

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