

## CATALYST FOR ACTION

Tom Lia

Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board, Orland Park, Illinois

» **Advocacy work:** Taking a leading role in helping Illinois communities adopt residential fire sprinkler requirements. [FireSprinklerInitiative.org/Illinois](http://FireSprinklerInitiative.org/Illinois)

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Send an email to Tom Lia, and chances are you’ll get an automatic reply that he’s out assisting with one of the many home fire sprinkler demonstrations that take place regularly in Illinois. Or giving a show-and-tell on sprinklers to the public inside a nearly completed home. Or speaking at a national conference on sprinkler advocacy while promoting the Fire Sprinkler Initiative. Despite the auto-reply email, he’s able to get back to you almost immediately. How he has time for sleep is a mystery.

As one of the most respected sprinkler advocates in the country, Lia, 59, possesses an instinctive power to ignite action in his state; close to 100 Illinois communities have adopted NFPA 13D, *Installation of Sprinkler Systems in One- and Two-Family Dwellings and Manufactured Homes*. Adhering to a one-community-at-a-time approach to sprinkler adoption—California had a similar approach before sprinkler requirements went statewide in 2011—Lia is quick to deflect any credit he might receive for these accomplishments.

“It’s due to the dedication and motivation of the fire and building officials who believe in the sprinkler concept,” says Lia, executive director of the Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB), a nonprofit promoting legislation, raising public awareness, and educating code officials and government policymakers on home fire sprinklers. (He’s also a regular contributor to NFPA’s Fire Sprinkler Initiative blog, [sprinkler.blog.nfpa.org](http://sprinkler.blog.nfpa.org).) “We’re just giving them the tools to support their efforts.”

These educational tools, however, are the likely catalyst for Illinois’ adoption efforts. As part of the Illinois Fire Sprinkler Coalition, NIFSAB has assisted with an astounding 500 live burn and sprinkler demonstrations in the past decade. These outdoor events utilize side-by-side wooden structures—one equipped with sprinklers, one without—filled with

household furnishings that are set aflame. “Viewers see, feel, and hear the demonstration,” says Lia, who is usually on hand to narrate the fire spread and sprinkler activation. “All sprinkler myths are dispelled. When the fire goes to flashover, we explain that nobody—not even a firefighter with protective gear—survives.”

Lia joined the fire service in 1977 and rose through the ranks to become fire marshal of the Orland Fire Protection District in 1992. Those experiences showed him fire’s devastation firsthand. The sprinkler seed was planted as he conducted building inspections and questioned why some structures were sprinklered and others weren’t. “We’re able to protect people where they work and shop, but we’re not able to do anything about where they live?” asks Lia. “That really started to bother me.”

Lia switched gears in 1999 and joined NIFSAB, where he felt he could better cultivate his newfound passion. Amid the successes, there have been challenges. Today, NIFSAB’s emphasis is as much about preserving ordinances on the books as it is about bringing sprinklers to new communities. “Even during the economic recession, we probably passed 20 to 25 sprinkler ordinances,” says Lia. “But within the last couple of years, [sprinkler] opponents have been making a real aggressive push in our state. It does get discouraging. We did lose two ordinances during that time.”

Sharing the sprinkler mission helps him stay positive, he says. “I love it when there’s an energetic fire chief or building official who gives us a call and wants to help—we’re here for them,” Lia says. “We were at a point a few years ago where the resources just weren’t there anymore. Then NFPA came along and announced the Fire Sprinkler Initiative. When NFPA decided to make sprinklers a major initiative, I knew this effort would be won in the long run.”

**DEMONSTRATED COMMITMENT**  
Tom Lia has assisted with some 500 live burn and sprinkler demonstrations over the past decade.