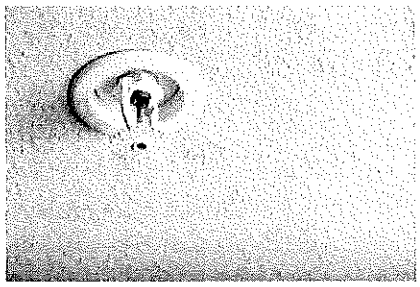
At the March 1, 2016, public hearing on two bills to mandate fire sprinklers in new 1&2 family homes (HB 5278, SB 238), David LaFond of the Nat'l Fire Sprinkler Association (NFSA) stated that home builders care only about their profits and not the life safety of their customers and fire fighters. Beyond despicable, we also find NFSA's comments hypocritical given that NFSA's members include sprinkler manufacturers and sprinkler installers. NFSA also makes numerous errors in responding to our documentation that supports our position opposing mandatory fire sprinkler installation in 1&2 family homes. See also Significance of Perspective, which examines the motivations of all stakeholders on fire sprinklers. Here, we address the home builder's view on fire safety in response to the NFSA:

It's More than Just Smoke Alarms (March 4, 2016)

Home Building and Fire Safety



The National Association of Home Builders and the Home Builders & Remodelers Association of Connecticut are firm believers in safe, affordable homes. Our members have a vested interest in the safety of their products, both during the building process and after their house becomes someone's home.

For that reason, home builders are active participants in the codes and standards development process, helping to make sure that each advance in building science and technology is weighed for the appropriate balance of safety, efficiency and cost to help ensure that each code cycle results in advances that improve homes without pricing them out of reach.

The home builder acts as a consumer advocate, offering counterpoint to code change proposals that benefit particular brands or products.

And when it comes to advances in fire safety technology, our members are proud to produce homes built to building codes designed to keep their occupants safer than homes built in previous generations.

There have been significant improvements to the fire safety of homes over the past few decades, leading to a dramatic, continued decrease in fires, injury, death and property loss. As fire safety professionals know, fire deaths have decreased by over 60% since 1960 (50% since 1978), while the death rate based on population size has decreased by well over 70%.

Technological innovations in building techniques include advanced heating and electrical systems, egress windows, hardwired, interconnected smoke alarm systems, and fire-resistant materials and features like the separation between the house and the garage and fireblocking in concealed spaces. Claims by proponents of fire sprinklers that homes built today are unsafe because of new light frame (i.e., truss) construction are simply false because light frame/truss construction has been used for many decades; it's not new at all. See confirmation direct from a fire battalion chief who also is a building contractor.

When home owners combine the advances in fire safe construction codes and practices with proper maintenance, homes stay safer. And as more of the existing housing stock that doesn't include these improved fire safety features is replaced, this trend will continue.

Why Smoke Alarms Matter

The effectiveness of smoke alarms cannot be underestimated. Hardwired, interconnected smoke alarms have been required by NFPA 72, *National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code* since 1989. Connecticut was a leader in adopting hardwired smoke alarms for new 1&2 family homes on October 1, 1985, and our code continues to become more effective with ongoing technical advances.

Such improvements include the proliferation of 10-year integral batteries, which substantially lengthen the interval between low-battery signals. Batteries in these units also cannot be used in other devices, which eliminates the possibility of the battery being removed to power other electronic devices.

There is also continued research aimed at improving the detection logarithm to greatly reduce false alarms from cooking. All these improvements are still unfolding, and can be expected to further reduce the number of fatalities. And throughout the country, local home building associations often work with community fire departments on fire safety campaigns and to ensure that consumers take advantage of this life-saving technology by conducting awareness campaigns and even donating new units.

This education and awareness is vital, because the main causes of unintentional, non-confined home fires are heating equipment and electrical malfunction, both primarily associated with older homes. New homes are equipped with new heating appliances with clearances, vents, and chimneys in accordance with current codes as well as additional safety features, making them more reliable and producing a more balanced airflow reducing the need for supplemental heaters, which are more likely to start a fire.

And FEMA's report One- and Two-Family Residential Building Fires (2011-2013) finds "a strong relationship between housing age and the rate of electrical fires . . . with housing over 40 years old having the strongest association with electrical distribution fires. As of 2013, the median age of one- and two-family housing was over 35 years."

Claims by proponents of fire sprinklers that, today's new homes will become tomorrow's old homes, miss the mark entirely. Today's new homes will retain today's fire safe construction features forever. They will not magically convert to the less safe older homes of today.

Going forward, it is important to carefully consider any additional requirements so we don't put safer new homes financially out of reach for those households now in older dwellings.

It is a sad irony when Americans cannot afford to be safe. Families who cannot qualify to purchase homes due to the increased costs from well-meant, but expensive and ultimately unnecessary safety features will remain in housing that is less safe, because it's built to less stringent code requirements. These older homes can have outdated appliances, space heaters, faulty wiring, or other characteristics that might lead to a greater risk of a fire starting, or a lack of smoke alarms and egress windows installed to today's codes which increase the chances of dying in that fire.

For that reason, we take our code development responsibilities very seriously. We take the health and safety of our customers very seriously. And, we must ensure that new homes are safe, but not just available to the wealthy.