

Editor's Note: One of the significant points here is the headline.

Sprinklers Lacking in Fatal Fire

Officials say system would have saved two at care home.

By Phillip Reese, Ramon Coronado, and David Richie, *Sacramento Bee*, November 28, 2006

A sprinkler system would have prevented the deaths of two elderly women in a fire Sunday at a small Citrus Heights residential care facility, fire officials said.

The home had passed its most recent fire inspection and was not required by law to have such a system.

A bill that would have eventually mandated sprinklers in such homes was vetoed earlier this year by the governor, [see page 27] who said in his veto message that the measure could hurt seniors because many homes cannot afford such systems and would end up closing.

Asked to comment Monday, Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Sabrina Lockhart referred back to the veto message.

No comment was available from the owners of the facility.

The state inspector cited the home for numerous health and safety violations during a visit in March 2005, ultimately saying that its administrator was unqualified to run the home, records show.

The 11 p.m. Sunday fire — the cause of which is still under investigation — quickly spread through the home, killing the two women before neighborhood rescuers could save them.

Rescuers got the other four patients out, though one woman remained in critical condition at Mercy San Juan Medical Center on Monday.

Authorities have not yet released the names of the two women who were killed.

"If we had sprinklers in here, there would have been no fatalities," said Mike Stewart, deputy fire marshal with the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District. "Everyone would have got out alive."

The cost of installing a sprinkler system is about \$3 per square foot, less than the cost to install a carpet, said Gene Gantt, a firefighter with the Benicia Fire Department, who is legislative director for the California Fire Chiefs Association.

The facility that caught fire was a three-bedroom home, which could put the cost of a sprinkler system between \$4,500 and \$6,000.

During an emergency, elderly patients who can't walk need the extra time that sprinklers provide, Stewart said. They are going to be confused at best, possibly not coherent.

If a resident jumps out of bed and stands up in "super-heated smoke and gas," they can be gone in just a few seconds,

Stewart said.

"I'm sure this will probably come up again since this fire killed two people," said Assemblywoman Betty Karnette, D-Long Beach, referring to her vetoed bill. "They wouldn't

need to be in these facilities if they didn't need help."

Even if the bill had been signed, it would not have taken effect in time to have required installation of sprinklers before Sunday's fire. At least two legislative measures to require such sprinkler systems have stalled in previous years.

Geneva Carroll, a representative from Ombudsman Services of Northern California who was at the scene of the fire, said many senior care advocates support the firefighters' call for sprinkler systems but have questions about whether such a requirement could be implemented.

"In the Sacramento area there are at least 400 of these types of facilities that would have to be retrofitted," Carroll said.

The facility, known as Home Place I, is one of three such homes located next to each other on Canevalley Circle, all run by the Costea family.

The facility passed its last fire inspection in September 2003, and there were no code violations, firefighters said. An operating smoke alarm helped get some of the residents out safely, they added.

Inspectors from the California Department of Social Services, however, found 18 health and safety violations during a March 2005, inspection resulting from a complaint. The state ordered the home's managers to attend a meeting and come up with a plan to fix the problems.

One of the deficiencies cited the facility for not recently servicing a fire extinguisher — a problem that was rectified. The other citations ranged from record-keeping violations to a lack of adequate training. One citation alleged a facility supervisor lied to inspectors about the administration of insulin to a diabetic patient.

In the end, the inspector wrote, "based on findings and numerous serious deficiencies issued, it is apparent that the administrator has failed to meet the qualifications of an administrator required in the regulations."

Soon afterward, facility managers met with the state and signed a plan to fix the problems, including having an administrator on site regularly and requiring extra staff training.

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