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**New Fire Prevention Regulations for Floor Finishing**

This is the time of year when many home improvement projects get underway. If one of those projects involves using flammable liquids such as floor finishing, State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan wants to remind you that new safety regulations take effect on June 1. State Fire Marshal Coan said, "Starting June 1, 2010 when using certain flammable liquids to finish wood floors, the fire department must be notified and in buildings with more than four units, a permit must be obtained prior to the start of any work."

Over the past several years there have been several tragic fires stemming from the many fire hazards that the floor finishing process poses. Coan said, "These revised regulations address the many different fire hazards of floor finishing – improper electrical hook-ups, the storage of waste materials, and dust explosion hazards, as well as the application of flammable liquids."

**Highlights of the Regulation**

**Permit and Notice to Fire Department Required**

The previous regulations applied only to bowling alleys, but have been amended to address the fire hazards of wood floor sanding, finishing or refinishing in all occupancies. Starting June 1, 2010, a fire department permit will be required when certain flammable liquids are going to be used in floor finishing in buildings with more than four units. In buildings with four or fewer units, the fire department must be notified.

**Consider Less Dangerous Alternatives**

Use of water-based or non-flammable floor refinishing products does not require notification to or a permit from the fire department. Whether homeowners are doing the work themselves or hiring a contractor, it is important to consider the fire safety aspects of the materials being used. Cheaper and faster products or service can cost more in the long run if there is an explosion or fire.

**Preventing Flammable Liquid Fires**

The regulations require the removal of ignition sources such as pilot lights prior to the application of finishing products considered flammable liquids until the product has dried. It also prohibits using flammable liquids when direct ventilation of the space to the outside is not possible. The new regulation also requires posting warning signs in buildings with more than one dwelling unit when flammable liquids are used in floor finishing.

**Preventing Electrical Fires**

It reinforces the fact that the Massachusetts Electrical Code requires an electrical wiring permit when connecting equipment directly to an electrical panel. Some floor refinishing equipment use larger amounts of electricity than home outlets typically provide, so the equipment is often connected directly to the electrical panel in violation of the code. This poses a fire risk and bypasses the normal circuit protection in electrical systems.

**Preventing Fires From Dust and Rags**

The regulations also address the safe storage of flammable and combustible products and waste materials. There have been many fires started by the spontaneous combustion of the dust from floor sanding put into airtight bags and from rags soaked in combustible and flammable liquids. Some floor finishing products such as linseed oil are considered combustible but not flammable. Rags soaked in combustible chemicals still pose a serious fire risk if not properly handled. The regulations require use of a metal waste can with a self-closing cover for all waste products including wood dust and rags. The can must be removed from the building daily and the materials disposed of properly.

**A Brief History of Fires from Floor Finishing**

In September 2004, a Somerville explosion and fire in a triple-decker caused the deaths of two workers, injured two workers and four firefighters. It is believed that vapors from the flammable liquids were ignited by the pilot light on the gas water heater.

In July 2005, a 43-year old man was part of a floor sanding crew that was refinishing the hardwood floors in a Hull single-family home. Once again, fumes from the sealant came in contact with the pilot of the gas water heater causing an explosion and the ensuing fire.

On May 24, 2008, a fire started in a North Reading home where they were refinishing the hardwood floors. It started in a corner where there was trash, urethane soaked rags and sawdust from sanding the floors.

On February 9, 2010, an historic octagonal house in Holyoke was severely damaged when a barrel full of sawdust from a refinished floor ignited.