



Lives 'at risk' with lax laws on sprinklers

Deadly blaze prompts renewed calls to equip all retirement homes with life-saving systems

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KENYON WALLACE
STAFF REPORTER

Safety of seniors is being put behind cost savings when it comes to installing potentially life-saving sprinklers in old retirement homes, says the president of the Ontario Association of Fire Chiefs.

In the wake of Monday's fire at Muskoka Heights retirement residence in the north end of Orillia that killed two people and critically injured eight others, Richard Boyes says it is "frustrating" that provincial regulations have failed to require sprinkler systems in all retirement homes.

"What is the cost of a human life?" Boyes said. "Every day that we do not act on this is another day where a life is put at risk."

Boyes' frustration stems from the fact that 14 years ago a fire at Meadowcroft Place retirement home in Mississauga – eerily similar to Monday's fire in Orillia – prompted a coroner's jury to make 53 recommendations to improve fire safety in the province, including making sprinkler systems mandatory in homes caring for eight or more residents.

Eight people died in the 1995 fire at the Meadowcroft home, which, like the Orillia facility, did not have sprinklers. Because the two homes were classed as seniors' residences, rather than long-term care facilities or nursing homes, they fell under the same fire prevention rules as private residences.

"If you went back 14 years and look at all the retirement homes that have been rebuilt and redone ... think of how many we'd have sprinklered today," Boyes said.

Ontario Fire Marshal Pat Burke said asking owners to retrofit buildings with sprinklers is an expensive proposition.

"What's frustrating for me is that we have technology out there that we're not deploying," Burke said.

Several recommendations stemming from the coroner's inquest into the Meadowcroft fire, including the requirement for monthly fire drills and sufficient staff on duty to carry out a home's fire safety plan, were incorporated into the province's fire code. In April 2010, Ontario will finally be brought onside with the national building code when all new multi-storey residential buildings will be required to have sprinklers.

An aide to Ontario Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services Rick Bartolucci said the minister "looks forward to the fire marshal's report with regard to the tragic fire in Orillia and is open to considering any changes that protect Ontarians" but would not specify whether that would mean changing the Ontario fire code.

Peter Kormos, NDP MPP and the party's critic for community safety, said the Muskoka Heights

home was another example of privately run seniors' residences that "drop between the regulatory cracks."

"It's long overdue that there be thorough regulation of all facilities for seniors, whether it's long-term care or residential," Kormos said.