

Omaha NE Lauded for absence of fire deaths

12/10/2011 11:00 AM

A year ago, fire officials in other states called Omaha's two-year streak without a fire death remarkable.

One year later, still with no fire deaths - well, that's "extraordinary."

The last Omaha fire death was three years ago - Dec. 9, 2008 - when 3-year-old Davius Potter-Tate died of smoke inhalation after a house fire. He was one of five who died in Omaha fires that year.

The following calendar year, 2009, was the first since at least 1949 with no fire fatalities.

Omaha firefighters typically fight about 350 building fires each year.

Steve Zaccard, a fire marshal in charge of fire prevention at the St. Paul Fire Department in Minnesota, called Omaha's record extraordinary. He said he planned to call fire officials to find out what they are doing right.

"It's not by chance, I'm certain," he said. "It's by design. My hat's off to them."

Before 2009, the lowest number of Omaha fire deaths in the past 20 years occurred in 1995, with one death recorded.

Fire Department officials attribute the absence of fire deaths to policies instituted by Fire Chief Mike McDonnell that increased training, smoke detector installations, public education and building inspections.

"Everything is off the charts compared with what it used to be," said Omaha Fire Marshal Jim Gentile.

Capt. David Mann, a 22-year department veteran, runs the outreach and fire prevention programs

He said a working smoke detector generally means that people will get out of a burning home faster, leading to early notification of 911.

Some of the 1,700 smoke detectors the department has installed this year - up from 212 in 2007 - have likely saved lives, he said.

Another factor is the department's in-school outreach. Mann and other officials staffed 60 assemblies at Omaha elementary schools this year, at each place leaving the students an assignment: Go home and create a fire escape plan.

At least two times that plan had to be carried out after a student's house caught fire, Mann said.

On top of the prevention push, there's one more important factor, Gentile said.

"I know there's a lot of luck here," he said. "And we don't want to jinx anything."

Other Omaha-area cities also have recorded few or no deaths; neither Ralston nor Papillion has seen a fire death in at least 10 years.

Eleven people have died in Council Bluffs fires in the past decade, though in four of those years there was not a single fatality.

But for a city the size of Omaha, three straight years with no deaths is a feat, said fire officials in other states.

Tammy Snow, deputy fire chief in Wichita, Kan., noted that Omaha is well below the national average of deaths per year, which are about 12 per 1 million people.

With about 400,000 people, that would be five or six deaths per year in Omaha

"Kudos to your department," Snow said.