



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 15

First Alert External Affairs, Deborah Hanson

Announcer: My Safe:LA is the public education partner of the Los Angeles Fire Department. You're listening to a My Safe LA fire and life safety podcast.

Todd Leitz: I'm Todd Leitz, public information officer for My Safe LA and I'm joined by our great friend and colleague in the efforts to reduce fire fatality, Deborah Hanson, director of external affairs for First Alert. Hi, Debbie. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Deborah Hanson: Hey, Todd. Thanks. It's great to be here.

Todd Leitz: We've had eight fire fatalities in the city of Los Angeles in structure fires in the first six weeks of 2014 despite the fact that it's been a somewhat warm and dry winter. So that's a huge amount of fire deaths here in Los Angeles for this short of period of time, and what's most tragic about them is that pretty much all of them could have been prevented

In every case, in all eight fatalities, there was no smoke alarm or no working smoke alarm and that just heightens the fact that smoke alarms are the most important fire safety tool in your home and there's so many different types of smoke alarms, Debbie, that some people get confused. How do people avoid that kind of confusion? And maybe talk a little bit about the different types of alarms that are available to people and how they can decide which one is best for them.

Deborah Hanson: Sure. Sure. I hope people really don't get horribly confused especially when they go to the shelf. I always say first and foremost if you don't know what you're supposed to have call your local fire department first to get an idea of what it is that you need and we'll talk about numbers later, but why there's so many different smoke alarms today is because technology is always evolving, and that's really important. Continuous, affordable safety innovations are out there. So there's many, many different

features and benefits today that are available to consumers that weren't 10, 15, 20 years ago.

So I always tell people, "Just when you're at the shelf really look at the packaging and see what it is because it should tell you exactly what it is." There's different types of sensing technology. There's both photo electric and ionization. There's alarms today that have both of those technologies in one alarm. There are alarms today which are great that are both carbon monoxide and smoke alarms. And then when I talked about different features and benefits you can find alarms now -- we actually came out and pioneered the voice and location feature. So for example, a smoke alarm can tell you where the hazard is and if it is a smoke and a CO alarm it can say, "Warning" -- whether it's a smoke alarm -- "Warning. Evacuate. Smoke in child's bedroom. Evacuate."

So it could tell you where it is and what it is and it's crucial especially when we're talking about escaping and escape time to knowing where an alarm is coming from and hopefully you have a plan and you practice it and that can hopefully make that getting out of the house a little easier. So there are many different types today and sometimes it's a requirement on where you live and what your codes are and what the building codes are. For example, in California your state law actually requires hard wired alarms, meaning that the alarm is connected directly into the home's electrical wiring. That's for newly constructing homes, but existing homes can have battery operated alarms. So lots of different options and literally call your fire department, just look at the packaging closely, and read and it should be able to tell you what it is.

Todd Leitz: All right. So you've gone to the store and you've decided which is the best alarm for you and which one you need. Now you got to figure out, "Well, how many do I need?" So the most important part of that imagine is where to put them and how many do you -- so what are the key places where smoke alarms need to be placed for optimal safety?

Deborah Hanson: Well, first and foremost one of the big issues is that people aren't having enough smoke alarms. Really you can find a smoke alarm for \$7.00 to \$10.00 range and people might go to the shelf and think, "I'm going to get one," and you have to know what you need. So I'm going to start with the fact that the National Fire Protection Association actually recommends that smoke alarms be installed on every single level of the home and that would include a basement if you have one, inside each sleeping area, so in every

bedroom or area that you sleep, and in the main corridors or the hallways of your home. So to give you an example for that, if it's an average two story, maybe a three bedroom home in America, that would need at least four smoke alarms to meet the NSPA standards.

So that's first and foremost, and then we talk about proper placement and so we've talked about needing them in the bedrooms and needing them on every single floor, but then there's places that you have to be careful about where you don't want to put them. So knowing placement is really important and if you have a smoke alarm that doesn't require batteries, even so you're hardwired, it's still important to test them and to make sure that they're working. So we talk to people about replacing their alarms every ten years because ten years is the recommendation of when you need to change alarms. Keep in mind, this is a unit that's working 24/7, 7 days a week, 24 hours a day sensing for smoke and you have to eventually change it because the sensor does get less sensitive as the years go on.

Todd Leitz: Is there some way to tell, say you moved into a home and is there a way to tell on the smoke alarm itself how old it is or when it when into service so to speak?

Deborah Hanson: Yeah. A couple of ways. Actually if you take the smoke alarm off the wall and look at the back plate it should give you a manufacturer's date and you should figure within two to three years. Sometimes it doesn't mean that the person put it up then. Sometimes people actually write the dates. We have date codes, a little space on the alarm where we recommend that the consumer write the date so they know, and then actually alarms today have a sound and they make a warning sound that it is the end of life sound.

So believe it or not all that information is in the manual and in this day and age what's nice is all the manuals are online. So if you couldn't get a hold of someone at customer service for in the morning and something was bugging you, you could look it up and find out what the beeps mean because I know people don't typically save that information.

Todd Leitz: That's for sure. And there's been so many technological advances in smoke alarms and other types of fire safety devices. Let's talk a little bit about some of the new exciting things that are coming down the pike for smoke alarms and that will be available very soon.

Deborah Hanson: Sure. The technology also has to change. We're always trying to keep up in advance and keep that safety going and keep advances in safety going. So there's a whole new line of alarms. We have a couple actually. We have a very new line called "the Adam," which is a micro, very small sleek alarm that has a longer life battery as well and it's a micro size. So it's like the size of a votive candle, very teeny. Maybe for those who not necessarily want to see it and has a little bit of a designer look to it. So it's a really sleek looking alarm. here's a whole other designer line that's much more streamlined and much thinner than your typical thicker alarm and different styles and different finishes today.

And another thing is that we try to have technology to help with false alarms and nuisances alarms. So utilizing photo electric technology is important and knowing where to install your alarms will help with that. So there's different advances in technology that come with that and like I mentioned, the voice and location. Those are -- they're not brand new to us because we brought them to market 2005, 2006 in that area, but now we have many alarms that have those and like I said, carbon monoxide and smoke alarms and then different even gas alarms are out there today. So there's many different options and different technologies and even greater looks. So really the consumer has so many choices today.

Todd Leitz: Are you saying that smoke alarms are starting to get kind of hip?

Deborah Hanson: If they can, they are getting a little hip. It's important. This is a safety product that is in your house and you don't want to look at it as an eye sore and it's something that is streamlined in your home, but yet it's out of sight. You don't want it completely out of mind, but you want it to look good. Gone are the days of having a hockey puck on the wall being acceptable. We treat our home so much different now. We're cocooning and people are finding things to do on Pinterest in their homes and blogging and websites and we're having stay-cations. And the home is really a place where you don't need a designer today to come in and do things to your home. Home owners, consumers are doing these things themselves. They're going into like a Lowe's store and figuring it out how to do designer looks on their own. So we're offering these types of opportunities for consumers to make a room look fantastic.

Todd Leitz: Yeah. That new, very small smoke, the Adam, correct? Is that what it's called?

Deborah Hanson: Yes.

Todd Leitz: It's very sleek, very small, and it's actually very good looking alarm. So that's a choice for those of you who are out here in California. You got trendy houses, you want to have a good looking smoke alarm as well. Now here in California also later this year in the summer of 2014 I believe there's going to be new requirements for what types of smoke alarms are going to be required in new construction. Tell me a little bit about that.

Deborah Hanson: Sure. You have a new law coming as you said. I believe it's July 1 is the date and that will require that the battery operated alarms and existing construction have a ten year battery and have a sealed ten year battery. So I think --

Todd Leitz: So you don't change the smoke alarm -- I mean you don't change the batteries, you just change the smoke alarm after ten years? Is that --

Deborah Hanson: Correct. Correct. It is a sealed unit and it will operate for ten years and this is an important point though. I always try to bring this when I even said, "Out of sight, but not necessarily out of mind," we don't want to forget about those alarms either. They need to be tested. You have to make sure they're working. You want to make sure they don't have dust or cobwebs and they're dusted and that they look good and it's not an out of sight, out of mind. We really want people to make sure that with their installing ten year alarms that they're checking them and making sure they work.

But we will have an extensive line come probably Q2 all over California with all of these advancements that I mentioned earlier, the designer looks and the talking and the room location in the ten year line too. So you can get a combination smoke and feel alarm that will tell you what the hazard is and where the hazard is with really easy programming and when I talk about easy it's as easy as popping in the batteries and the alarm actually starts talking to you and tells you what to do. There's nothing additional with online trying to figure things out or going to website. The alarm basically talks you through what to do.

Todd Leitz: Fantastic. So really there's really no excuse as a home owner, as a responsible citizen not to have smoke alarms in your home. As you mentioned there's so many different types, so many different price points. You can get them for as low as under \$10.00. Is that true?

Deborah Hanson: Absolutely. In this day and age there are so many options and I just think it's like groups like My Safe LA getting the message

across again because when people know the facts and they listen to this information they certainly don't -- they would never say, "Oh, I don't need it," or "It's not going to happen to me." It makes them sit up and think, "Boy, do I have enough? Did I test it?" We need these reminders unfortunately. We really do. Everyone's so busy and running around and job and work and home and life and you need these reminders to let you know how important these things are.

These are really inexpensive life safety devices that with minimal maintaining will definitely save your life. So they're crucial and like you said, \$7.00, \$10.00 easy to get your basic smoke alarm and then all these other feature benefits I told you about, you can go up to \$50.00, \$60.00, \$70.00 and I -- \$70.00 is in the range where you're doing something like wireless inner connected, but \$50.00, \$60.00 for the talking and combinations will be out there. So everybody should be able to find what they're looking for.

Todd Leitz: And you certainly can't put a price on human life and the people that you love and your neighbor and friends. So I remember you gave me a statistic that really put it into perspective. It was like the cost of a nice dinner out you could equip your home completely with brand new smoke alarms and carbon monoxide sensors and make sure that you have that line of defense that as you mentioned is vigilant 24/7, 365 days of the year.

Deborah Hanson: Absolutely.

Todd Leitz: So very important. We have such a great relationship at My Safe LA with First Alert. You guys have recently -- you guys have donated so many thousands of smoke alarms to us alone to give out free to people that indicate through our various programs, our older adult program and our junior fire inspector program, that they need a smoke alarm in their home and we're so happy that if that's the only smoke alarm they have in their house at least they have one.

And so we're so grateful to First Alert for your generosity and for your collaboration in helping us get the word out and helping us actually get the hardware out there that stands visual over people's homes and keeps them safe in the middle of the night. So we thank you for that and it just makes me think about how this type of relationship at First Alert and [inaudible 00:15:55] of My Safe LA, how does that benefit the public in your mind?

Deborah Hanson: Well, it definitely does, but first I want to say I think, Todd, the program is by far just absolutely exceptional. I work with fire

departments across the United States every single day. I'm our liaison for fire service and you guys do such a fantastic job. I hope your listeners and the citizens of LA realize that they are so incredibly lucky to have a group as talented and committed to the safety and prevention message because you really have set the bar very high with your prevention efforts. It's great and it's critical for First Alert

It's something absolutely we enjoy doing, but it's a cornerstone of our mission basically. We're committed to educating home owners about safety. That's our business and it's just absolutely important and partners like My Safe LA help us spread the awareness, help us get the prevention message to the folks who really need it, are hands on, going into classrooms, talking to the folks who really can bring home the message back to their parents and their communities and we're just proud. We're really proud to support your efforts. It's absolutely our joy.

Todd Leitz: We really appreciate that. So let's wrap this up by doing -- I'm going to throw some rapid fire questions at you just to review real quick so we can break it down for folks in a very simple way. So how many smoke alarms do you need to have in your home or apartment or basically where do they need to be?

Deborah Hanson: You need to have a smoke alarm inside every bedroom or sleeping area and on every level of the home and if it's an apartment with one bedroom I would put an additional one outside even in the hallway. That's critical having them and placement, like we said, is really important knowing that you need it in the bedroom. I've talked about this statistic before, but why it's so important in the bedroom, you need to get up and out in the event of a fire or smoke in the middle of the night. People don't realize this, but when you are asleep your sense of smell is asleep. So you need that warning to wake you up to get you up and out.

Todd Leitz: Excellent. And so how often should you be testing your smoke alarms to make sure that they're fully operational in keeping visual over you at night?

Deborah Hanson: Folks need to be testing their smoke alarm literally once a week and I know that sounds a little extreme and not everybody does that, but it's really important. So if you haven't done it, go do it. We tell people to change the batteries every six months. A great way to remember that is when we change the clocks change the batteries and when you have the ten years in place and you have ten year smoke alarm batteries please don't forget about them. Make sure that they're tested too. Really important. Check for

debris and dust and make sure that they're unobstructed with anything like that, like a web or a nest or just anything.

Todd Leitz: Deborah, thank you so much. I've been speaking with Deborah Hanson, the director of external affairs for First Alert. Thank you so much for your collaboration with My Safe LA. Thank you so much for your subject matter expertise and we hope to hear from you again. Maybe we'll do a future podcast exclusively on carbon monoxide and some of the concerns about that as well. I'm Todd Leitz, public information officer for My Safe LA and you've been listening to another My Safe LA fire and life safety podcast. See you next time.

Announcer: You've been listening to a My Safe LA fire and life safety podcast. My Safe LA is the public education officer of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Visit us at MySafeLA.org and LAFD.org.