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Department of Safety and Professional Services Urges Caution with Fireworks

MADISON, Wis. – Will it still be the Fourth of July with no fireworks? Community pyrotechnic displays are as much a part of the holiday as turkey is a part of Thanksgiving. Yet concerns that COVID-19 would easily spread among families crowded together, blanket-to-blanket, for hours prompted many festival organizers and municipalities to cancel their official events.

That hardly means there will be no fireworks—even in areas with no formal celebrations planned.

Indeed, the crackles, whistles and booms have already begun, and the American Pyrotechnic Association predicts those sounds will grow more frequent as we head into the weekend. According to an APA release, backyard consumer fireworks sales are at an all-time high because of COVID-related cancellations.

That is exactly what Vernon Green is concerned about. The Neenah-Menasha Fire Rescue Asst. Chief/Fire Marshal and President of the Wisconsin State Fire Inspectors Association says the Fourth of July routinely tops the list of most troublesome days for fire departments. Green says the holiday always brings an uptick in calls. Some come from neighbors with anxious dogs or the military veteran with PTSD who want the unpredictable and loud explosions to stop. Others are from the parents of teenagers with injuries from the firecrackers that went off in their hands. Then there are the extra traffic violations and crashes from people at parties and barbecues who drank too much before getting behind the wheel. It is always a busy night (or nights) for first responders.

This year, Green says, will be even worse. “People know that there are so many fireworks shows that have been cancelled all over the place, so the mindset is, ‘let’s have our own.’”

Yet Green says all fireworks, even legal ones like sparklers, can cause burns and other injuries or start a fire that leads to major property damage. Illegal fireworks can easily send someone to the emergency department. And almost no average citizen, Green notes, has the space, knowledge, certification, insurance, or safeguards to qualify for a permit to host any kind of makeshift show. “I get those requests every year,” Green said. “The answer is always no.”

The Department of Safety and Professional Services administers Wisconsin’s fire prevention program and works closely with fire departments across the state on fire and fire fighter safety. Brad Johnson, DPS fire prevention program section chief, points out that COVID adds another layer of complexity this year. Because every call brings fire fighters into contact, sometimes prolonged contact, with people they do not live with, any call could potentially expose a fire fighter to COVID. That poses a risk to not only the firefighters on the scene but also to their entire teams back at the station and their families at home.

“Fire departments have gone to extraordinary measures to keep their employees healthy and avoid unnecessary exposures to COVID in order to keep their crews intact, so they are able to respond to fire and EMS emergencies,” Johnson said. “I would really like to see the public support those efforts and not expose our first responders to unnecessary calls.”

DSPS Secretary-designee Dawn Crim also urges individuals to keep in mind the safety of their neighbors and first responders as they celebrate this weekend.

“We know how hard fire departments work to protect our communities, and we know that this weekend is one

of the most challenging times of the year for them,” she said. “When fire departments ask us to think long and hard about whether we set off fireworks in our backyards and driveways, we should think long and hard. And we should support their efforts. Everybody deserves to stay safe, and safety is everybody’s responsibility.”

In addition to fire prevention and safety work, the Department of Safety and Professional Services issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, and maintains the Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to stem excessive opioid prescribing. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.

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