

# Fire Perils Peak At Holiday Time

BY RICHARD GENTILVISO

The emergency 911 call came in about 7:40 a.m. on November 19. A person was reported as having trouble breathing. When firefighters responded to the fifth-floor apartment in the Queensbridge North houses, they found four occupants, two women and two children, struggling for air. The cause, according to the Fire Department, was a stove leaking carbon monoxide. The four inside the apartment were taken to the hospital and were reported to be in stable condition, according to a report in the November 20 *New York Times*. But they could have been killed.

There were 69 fire fatalities in 2005 in New York City. Fires caused by smoking took the lives of 23 persons, while electrical fires, including those caused by faulty outlets, overloaded outlets and extension cords, claimed 18 people. Fires caused by open flames, including children playing with matches or lighters as well as cooking fires, were the leading cause of fire fatalities, with 28 deaths.

With more than a third of home fires occurring during the months of December, January and February, the Fire Department Office of Safety Education and Public Information asked residents to be especially careful during these winter months at a December presentation to the Queens Borough Cabinet.

"Many home activities such as cooking, holiday decorations, electric space heaters, and the use of burning candles can result in a fire in your home," said an FDNY report on fire safety distributed at the meeting.

Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless,

tasteless and very toxic gas. Since it is a byproduct of incomplete combustion, any fuel-burning appliance, vehicle or tool that is not properly vented or maintained can be a potential source of carbon monoxide gas. People are at an increased risk of carbon monoxide poisoning during the winter months. As of November 2004, city law mandates the installation of a CO (carbon monoxide) detector in all city homes and apartments.

A smoke alarm is the single most valuable life-saving device you can have in your home, according to the Fire Department. An operable smoke alarm cuts your chances of dying in a fire by nearly half, but while 97 percent of homes have a smoke alarm, more than a third of these alarms don't work. The fire department recommends batteries be replaced twice a year.

For the holidays, statistics show that candles are a traditional part of holiday decorating but also that fires caused by candles peak each year at Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Christmas Eve.

"More than 33 percent of candle fires occurred when the candles were left unattended or abandoned. Roughly 25 percent of the fires occurred because something combustible, such as curtains or paper, was too close to the flame. Half the people killed by candle fires in the home were younger than age 20, with most of the victims between the ages of 5 and 9," FDNY said.

Christmas trees, both real and artificial, are also a source of fires. Defective lighting, including electrical cords and plugs, cause almost half of all Christmas tree fires.

The holidays also mean a lot more cooking,

and cooking fires remain the leading cause of home fires and fire injuries. Other leading causes are placing combustible items too close to a source of heat and electrical defects in the kitchen.

Finally, the holidays mean more entertaining, at which people may smoke. "More people die in fires started by carelessly discarded or abandoned smoking materials such as cigarette butts, ciga-

rette ashes, matches, lighters and ashtrays, than any other type of fire," according to the FDNY. Mattresses and bedding are among the most common materials to catch fire, with trash and upholstered furniture following. Smokers are seven times more likely than nonsmokers to have a fire in their home.

## Weiner Gets \$2.5 M for Safety Improvements

Five schools in Congressman Anthony Weiner's district will be getting upgraded traffic safety measures, thanks to a \$2.5 million grant from the federal Department of Transportation, the lawmaker announced.

The public safety improvements were announced at a press conference held by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Schools Chancellor Joe Klein, city Department of Transportation Commissioner Iris Weinshall and Weiner (D-Queens/Brooklyn).

The schools involved, according to Weiner, are P.S. 220, Edward Mandel School, Forest Hills; P.S. 71, Forest Elementary School, Ridgewood; I.S. 250, Robert F. Kennedy Community Middle School, Flushing, and St. Elizabeth School and J.H.S. 210, Elizabeth Blackwell School, both in Ozone Park.

The DOT studied all 1,471 elementary and middle schools in New York City. One hundred and thirty five had the highest accident rates and were designated priority schools for safety improvements. Of these, 34 are in Queens.

Weiner said the Safe Routes to Schools Program is a nationwide effort aimed at making travel to school safer by reducing traffic congestion, reducing the number of collisions in and around schools and lowering the speed limits in residential neighborhoods by installing signs and speed bumps.

For children ages 5 to 9 in New York City, getting hit by a motorist is the number one cause of death and injury, said Weiner of Forest Hills.

To achieve better safety for the students, each school involved in the program will receive infrastructure additions and upgrades such as speed bumps, traffic signals bicycle lanes, medians and crosswalks. Construction is set to begin next year.

Weiner holds a seat on the House Transportation Committee from which he secured the school safety grant. The total amount of funding needed to improve safety at all 135 priority schools is \$30 million. — **John Toscano**



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