

Smoke alarm sales spike after fatal fire

Kate King, Staff Writer

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Fire prevention experts offer these tips for protecting your home and family: Test your smoke warning systems at home. Have your children get used to the alarm's noise and develop an evacuation plan for your family. Have a smoke alarm on every level of your home, including the basement, and in every bedroom. For battery-operated smoke alarms, don't wait for the devices to start chirping before changing the batteries. Experts suggest changing smoke alarm batteries on daylight savings, or every October, which is Fire Safety Month.

STAMFORD -- Sales of smoke alarms rose at area hardware stores in the wake of the horrific house fire that killed three young sisters and their grandparents on Shippan Avenue Christmas Day.

Karp's and Keough's hardware stores in Stamford have seen a dramatic spike in fire prevention equipment sales over the past two weeks, store managers said. Customers are stocking up on smoke alarms, carbon monoxide detectors, fire escape ladders and extinguishers.

Ray Barrett, general manager at Keough's Hardware and Paint on High Ridge Road, said the store has sold two months worth of smoke detectors since the Christmas Day fire.

New York advertising executive **Madonna Badger** escaped the early morning blaze, which killed her daughters Lily, 9, and 7-year-old twins Grace and Sarah, as well as her parents, Pauline and **Lomer Johnson**.

Stamford building officials have said the old Victorian home was being renovated and likely did not have working smoke alarms in place at the time of the fire.

"Customers are saying that (the fire) was kind of a wake-up call," Barrett said. "People want to make sure they have more smoke detectors in the home. And they're replacing old ones, too."

Hardware stores in nearby towns have also experienced increased sales, but the fervor for smoke alarms appears to wane with distance. Three hardware stores in New York state reported no noticeable difference in sales, as did six hardware stores in Madonna Badger's native Louisville, Ky., where her father worked for years as a safety and security director for the liquor maker Brown-

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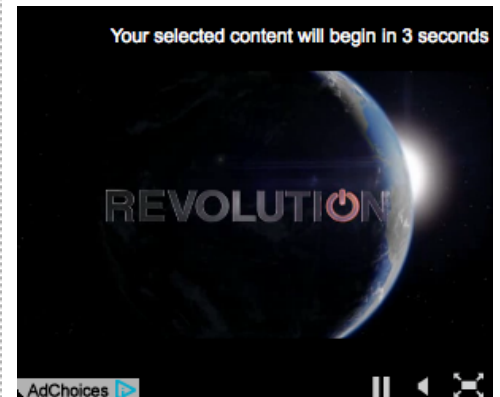


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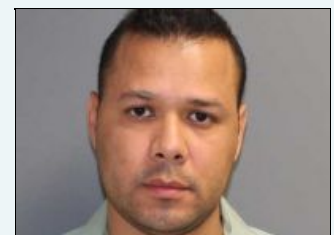
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Certified Fire Protection Specialist [Daniel Gardiner](#), a former fire chief in Fairfield, said it often takes a fatal incident within a community to spark a serious interest in fire prevention.

"You have to have your own fire," Gardiner said Thursday. "And your own deaths."

At Karp's [True Value Hardware](#) on Hope Street, customers have been stocking up on smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors at a rapid rate, owner [David Fogel](#) said.

"Since Christmas I'd say we have probably sold somewhere between 400 and 500 smoke alarms," Fogel said. "Normally it would probably be 60 or 70. Some people are buying two or three at a time,

which is somewhat uncommon. Usually the sales are one or two."

[Joe DiPietro](#), owner of Chubby's Hardware in Pound Ridge, N.Y., said he believes the extensive media coverage following the Shippan Avenue fire inspired homeowners to test their smoke alarms. Chubby's has restocked its shelves several times over the past week and a half, he said.

"Everyone's aware of the fire," said DiPietro, a Stamford resident. "I think they took a look around their house and said, 'What have I been neglecting and what can I do to make sure this doesn't happen to my family?'"

[Home Depot](#) in Norwalk has also seen a spike in smoke alarm sales recently, said manager [Steve Brandi](#). In Greenwich, several recent non-fatal fires in town coupled with the Stamford tragedy has heightened fire safety awareness in the community, [Greenwich Hardware Company](#) sales associate [Zachary Casey](#) said.

"I think the recent fire activity is generating sales," Casey said. "It's smoke alarms. It's gas and carbon monoxide alarms. Batteries too. People are generally wanting to be more aware of what's going on in their houses."

[Marshall Marinace](#), President of [Marshall Alarm Systems](#) in Westchester, said he has been getting more calls since Christmas. His company installs hardwired smoke and carbon monoxide warning systems, which trigger alarms throughout the house once smoke is detected and often alert an outside monitoring company as well.

"We've had customers call us from lower Westchester and surrounding areas inquiring to make sure their smoke detectors are working," Marinace said. "We've had a few people call us and ask us to come by and do a checkup for their system."

Gardiner said he wishes local authorities would place a greater emphasis on fire prevention. In Connecticut, only homes built after 1978 are required to install smoke or fire alarm systems.

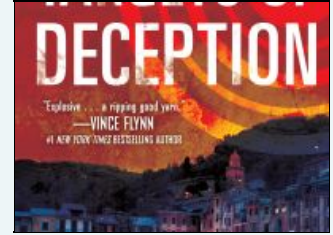
Fairfield is the only municipality in the state that requires smoke alarms in all homes, regardless of age, Gardiner said. The town's law passed in 1981, but it wasn't until a decade later that Fairfield's fire department began enforcing the ordinance. Gardiner said the town fire department launched a smoke alarm inspection initiative after firefighters rescued several people from a harrowing fire in January 1992.

"The next day I said, 'What the hell would we be doing if we lost three or four people last night?'" Gardiner said. "That prompted us to do a smoke alarm survey of all homes in Fairfield. We rang the doorbell at 22,506 homes."



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About 5 percent of the town's homeowners refused inspections, Gardiner said. A fatal fire occurred several months later at a [Grace Street house](#) where the homeowner turned them away.

"People don't think it's going to happen to them," Gardiner said. "I would hope that the Stamford fire department and all fire departments, that they might do what we did."

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