

Philadelphia Fire Commissioner Lloyd Ayers

Testimony on Senate Bill 920 Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee

Good morning. My name is Lloyd Ayers and I am the Fire Commissioner for the City of Philadelphia. Chairman Yaw, Chairman Brewster and members of the Senate Urban Affairs and Housing Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 920. Senator Browne, thank you for your leadership on this important public safety issue.

I am before you today in my capacity as Fire Commissioner, and I also want to make you aware that the fire community in Pennsylvania enthusiastically supports passage of Senate Bill 920. The Pennsylvania Fire Institute, the Pennsylvania Paid Professional Firefighters and the Pennsylvania Volunteer Firefighters Association have all publically expressed their support for this measure.

Senate Bill 920 will strengthen requirements for carbon monoxide alarms in homes in Pennsylvania. Passage of this legislation is critically important because it will dramatically improve public health and safety in our Commonwealth.

Carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless and tasteless gas that kills about 400 people and sends more than 20,000 to emergency rooms annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Carbon monoxide is the leading cause of accidental poison deaths in the nation and Pennsylvania has the unfortunate distinction of being a national leader in deaths and injuries as a result of this silent killer.

According to a 2007 report by the CDC, Pennsylvania leads the nation in accidental carbon monoxide poisoning deaths. 578 Pennsylvanians died from carbon monoxide poisoning from 2000-2006, according to the CDC.

The reason why carbon monoxide deaths and injuries occur so often in Pennsylvania is because we are one of the few cold weather states that have not yet passed a strong law requiring carbon monoxide alarms in homes. Over 30 states have enacted alarm requirements and many of these states have laws in place that extend requirements beyond new homes.

The fact of the matter is that many of these deaths and injuries are preventable through the use of a carbon monoxide alarm. I have seen this first-hand in my home city of Philadelphia. On January 1, 2009, an ordinance went into effect in the City that required most homes to have a carbon monoxide alarm. The results we have experienced are stunning.

In the 5 years prior to the enactment of our ordinance, 30% of the carbon monoxide incidents our fire department responded to resulted in the need to transport a victim to the hospital. In the 2 and a half years since enactment of the ordinance, 4% of the incidents resulted in the need to transport a victim to the hospital. Members of the Committee, these are dramatic, positive results and if Senate Bill 920 becomes law I see no reason why the entire state of Pennsylvania could not experience similar results.

Why has the number of hospital transports declined so much? It is simple. City residents have responded to the law by equipping their homes with carbon monoxide alarms and alarms work. They alert you that carbon monoxide is present in your home before the levels become too dangerous.

With these results in mind, it is my opinion that passage of the carbon monoxide alarm ordinance in Philadelphia has improved the public health and welfare of our citizens as much as any other action taken by the City in recent years.

It is very important that Pennsylvania act quickly to implement a statewide law that strengthens requirements for carbon monoxide alarms in homes. We are losing too many people to this silent killer and far too many are being injured by this lethal substance.

I have been a firefighter for over 30 years and have seen the devastating impact that carbon monoxide can have. I have been on the scene of incidents that resulted in the death of a resident. I have seen individuals suffer severe, life-long injuries that they are never able to fully recover from. Nearly all of these incidents could have been prevented through the use of a carbon monoxide alarm.

Burned indelible in my mind's eye is a call that we answered to a home in the mount airy section of the city. As we entered the home, an eerie sense of time and space enveloped our consciousness. We climbed the stairs to the second floor and could see a young man and woman fully clothed huddle close together holding each other as if to comfort one another on their bed. As we continued, in a room to the right, we could see a grandmother with a little baby nestled safely in her arms as she lay on her back in the bed. The silence and stillness stood out in the house. Three generations, all gone. A mother, her son, and his fiancée, and their daughter had a granddaughter.

In the Cheltenham, section of the city, I remember a middle aged man in his bathtub kneeling in the fetal position. We surmised that he had used the cold water to try to keep him awake as he worked on one of his very expensive collections. There were baseball cards, music albums, and CDs, all well kept and organized. But he had no warning of the deadly poisonous gas all around him. His mate was fortunate and called 911. She was hospitalized and recovered.

Our state has experienced many incidents in just the last few months as well. In April, two Delaware County residents living in separate apartments above a grocery store died after being overcome by carbon monoxide that came into their homes from the store. In February, a family of six in Pittsburgh had to be transported to a local hospital in the middle of the night after they were exposed to carbon monoxide. Children ages 1, 3 and 5 were among those impacted by this particular incident.

Pennsylvania has a major problem when it comes to carbon monoxide exposure and Senate Bill 920 can help solve this problem. By requiring the installation of alarms in homes when sold and in multi-family structures you will be capturing many homes and protecting many lives.

Carbon Monoxide alarms are inexpensive. You can purchase an alarm for as little as \$20 and they typically last seven years. An alarm is the only safe way to know if this silent killer is present in your home and many of the deaths and injuries that occur in Pennsylvania can be prevented with an alarm.

Members of the Committee, I urge you to move Senate Bill 920 through the legislative process quickly. This legislation has the broad support of the state fire community and it truly will result in lives saved in Pennsylvania.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I am happy to take any questions you may have.