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Unsafe Use of Generators Can Result in Carbon Monoxide Death

INDIANAPOLIS - Portable electric generators are used by many families and businesses to combat power outages, and have become an increasing cause of death, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

In light of recent flooding in Northwest Indiana and high winds in southern Indiana, the Indiana Department of Homeland Security (IDHS) is urging caution with the use of generators.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) estimates that there were an estimated 75 carbon monoxide poisoning deaths in 2005 and 2006. The most common dangers involving generators are carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning, electrical shock or electrocution, and fire hazards, according to the NFPA.

To help keep you and your neighbors safe, IDHS and the NFPA recommend following these guidelines:

- Generators should be operated in well ventilated locations - away from all doors, windows and vent openings.
- The generator should be located so that exhaust fumes cannot enter the home through windows, doors or other building openings.
- Battery-operated CO alarms or plug-in CO alarms with a battery back-up should be installed in the home, according to the manufacturer's installation instructions. Should CO enter the home and pose a risk, an alarm will sound.
- The generator must not be refueled while it is running. The generator should be turned off and allowed to cool down before refueling is performed.
- Fuel for the generator should never be stored in the home. Gasoline and other flammable liquids should be stored outside of living areas in properly labeled safety containers. They should be stored away from any fuel-burning appliances such as a gas hot water heater.
- Appliances should be plugged directly into the generator or a heavy duty outdoor-rated extension cord. The cord should be checked for cuts or tears and that the plug has all three prongs, especially a grounding pin. The house wiring should not be powered by plugging the generator into a wall outlet.

- If the generator must be connected to the house wiring to power appliances, a qualified electrician should install a properly rated transfer switch in accordance with the National Electrical Code® (NEC) and all applicable state and local electrical codes.

If the carbon monoxide alarm sounds and someone in the home is experiencing symptoms, immediately evacuate and call 911. At moderate levels of CO poisoning, you or your family can get severe headaches, become dizzy, mentally confused, nauseated, or faint. Low levels of CO can cause shortness of breath, mild nausea, and mild headaches, and may have longer term effects on your health.

If the alarm goes off and no one has symptoms, air out the home, turn off fuel-burning appliances and reset the carbon monoxide alarm. If elevated levels remain, the alarm will sound again after approximately six minutes. If the alarm sounds again, call a qualified heating contractor for inspection. Don't use any fuel-burning appliances until they have been inspected.

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