



Testimony before the New York City Council
Committees on Fire and Emergency Management and Housing and Buildings
Oversight - Issues Related to Recent Residential Fire
February 26, 2018

Good morning Chairs Borelli and Corney and committee members. My name is Melissa Barbour. I'm with the New York Fire Sprinkler Council, a division of Mechanical Contractors Association of New York, Inc. (MCA). MCA is an organization comprised of 130 member firms employing Steamfitters Local Union 638.

MCA represents licensed contractors that are responsible for the installation, inspection, testing and maintenance of fire-suppression systems in tens of thousands of high-density residential, commercial and industrial buildings, including hospitals, universities, power plants and water treatment facilities across the New York region. We represent the most competent, informed and highly skilled contractors in New York City and Long Island and regularly provide internal educational seminars and programs for our members that further the life-saving message of the importance of proper fire protection.

We are here today as a result of recent fire tragedies that struck our city; one being the devastating fire in the Bronx that killed 12 people, four of whom were children, injured another 14 people including 7 firefighters and displaced 22 families. This was the deadliest fire in New York City in 27 years. Our fire protection laws have not caught up with the times. In fact, New York City has not passed significant fire sprinkler system protection legislation for residential buildings since 1999.

Currently, New York City does not require existing residential buildings to install fire sprinklers, leaving residents in older, multi-family buildings unprotected. Yet we know fire sprinklers save lives and are the first line of defense, controlling 99 percent of all fires. The need for fire sprinklers is clear, particularly since modern residential fires grow hotter, more toxic and burn 800 percent faster than they did just 40 years ago, due to furnishings that contain petroleum-based material.

In a report published this past July by the National Fire Protection Association, we see that from 2010-2014, the death rate per 1,000 reported fires was 87% lower in properties with fire sprinklers than in properties with no automatic extinguishing systems. In addition, where sprinklers were present, flame damage was confined to the room of origin in 97% of fires. This saves lives first and foremost but also averts major property damage and can be the difference between being a family being displaced or being able to return home.

Another study conducted by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, College of Urban Affairs, showed that smoke detectors without a fire sprinkler system do not appear to be



enough to save lives or reduce major home damage. The study also notes that a fire sprinkler system pays for itself in the first few months after the home is complete.

We applaud the City for enacting significant fire safety legislation that has saved countless lives over the years. One of those laws was Local Law 26, passed in 2004 requiring all commercial buildings 100 feet or taller to be retroactively equipped with fire sprinklers. Since then, fire deaths in New York City office buildings and businesses have become nearly (virtually) non-existent.

However, this begs the question of equity. If office buildings are required to have sprinklers and shiny new condos are as well, why are residents who live in older buildings, who are often lower income, not given the same protection?

Florida has taken steps to protect its residents by passing a statewide law requiring sprinklers in residential buildings taller than 75 feet and older than 23 years. We see it can be done and we are urging the same - that all New York City buildings taller than 75 feet be retrofitted with sprinklers. We know fire sprinklers save lives and no one should be denied of that protection. What is safe for a building constructed in 2017 should be safe for a building built in 1950, and regulations should cover residents in both cases.

We cannot wait for another tragedy to strike before we act. Let's make sure we learn from the lives lost in the most recent Bronx fire as well as all of the other lives and homes lost in residential fires. We can and must do more to ensure equity and justice in our fire safety policies.

Thank you for your time today, and I'm happy to answer any questions.