

The First Building Safety Week

In 1980, a small group decided to spread the word about building safety with an event that grew into an international month-long observance

Jay Hamburg

As thousands of folks, whose jobs revolve around the importance of building and maintaining safe and sustainable structures, get ready to observe the 30th anniversary of Building Safety Week, it's a good time to take stock of how it all started.

After three decades of success, the safety event is expanding to a month-long observance entitled Building Safety Month presented by the International Code Council Foundation. The event will involve public officials, homeowners, disaster-mitigation professionals and school children at a higher rate than ever before.

Last year, Building Safety Week received positive proclamations and official statements from the President of the United States and the governors, mayors and county officials of 31 states.

More than 2,600 people in 17 countries pledged their support of the annual campaign that seeks to increase awareness for the crucial need to build and design safe, sustainable, green structures in the U.S. and around the world.

Also in 2009, about 400 media outlets carried that message to an estimated 416 million viewers, listeners and readers.

So it may seem hard to recall a time when the idea of highlighting building safety and increased vigilance was seen as something of a novel idea. Nevertheless, in 1980, there was a risk that the public might view the event negatively – a celebration of intrusive regulations and government red tape. The goal of the first Building Safety Week was to gain more acceptance of basic safety measures such as those that were missing in recent disasters. An example, they cited, was the Kentucky nightclub fire that erupted and killed 165 people just a couple years earlier.

Subsequent investigations found flagrant safety problems at that club in Northern Kentucky, The problems included too few and poorly marked exits, substandard electrical wiring, no firewall, no sprinkler system and no automatic fire alarm.

A similar scenario seems almost impossible to imagine today in buildings serving the public in the U.S. and other countries with modern safety codes. But it was just one of several tragedies that had been occurring when a group known as the National Conference of States on Building Codes and

Standards (NCSBCS) concluded the time was right to heighten the public's awareness of a need for stronger enforcement of better codes.

Marty Doucette remembers it as an exciting time and important challenge. He was in charge of education and training in the office of the then-Indiana State Building Commissioner Donald MacRae, who was one of the leaders of the NCSBCS and in charge of the national push during the first Building Safety Week.

Other groups involved early on in creating and growing a National Building Safety Week included National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), the Council of American Building Officials (CABO), the International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO), the Southern Building Code Conference International (SBCCI), Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA), and American Gas Association (AGA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

Many Feared Only More Tragedies Would Lead To Better Safety

In those days, many in the field feared it would take even larger disasters to get support for improving codes and enforcement.

"It was unfortunate that it took so many tragedies to become the catalyst for change," Doucette said.

However, even the office of the Indiana Building Commissioner owed its existence to another disaster, said Doucette, who today runs Pilgrim Companions, a company that acts as a watchdog and performance manager for Department of Defense contracts.

Indiana had suffered through a terrible tragedy on Oct. 31, 1963 when an explosion tore through the Indiana State Fairgrounds Coliseum. The disaster killed 74 people and injured about 400 more during the opening night of a Holiday on Ice show. Spectators were blown out of their seats. Falling chunks of concrete crushed others. In one case, several members of the same family lost their lives.

An investigation revealed that a popcorn-warming device had ignited gas from a leaking propane tank. Accusations of failure to keep the public safe were hurled at several officials, but ultimately only one conviction was handed down and that was eventually overturned, according to *The Indianapolis Star*.

In the wake of the tragedy, Indianapolis realized the inadequacy of its emergency planning, response and communications and upgraded its system. And, as Doucette recalls, the state realized a need for stronger oversight in building safety, leading to the office of the state building commissioner.

It was there that he and his boss – along with some other safety officials nationwide – found themselves among the leading proponents of the first Building Safety Week. The message was simple then: Be pro-active. Demand better safety features. Learn how to prevent tragedies at home.

He was pleased to see that members of public showed a keen interest in many facets of disaster prevention that do not usually provoke a visceral reaction.

“People don’t get emotional hearing about the quality of an exiting system,” Doucette said. “But as the nightclub fire showed, it is vitally essential. Suddenly there was a heightened awareness for the quality of construction and maintenance.”

Powerful earthquakes in California, Washington and Alaska during the 1960s and 1970s also got the public’s attention. It led to homeowners wanting ensure that gas appliances were made safer in construction and in their installation. There a new interest in retrofitting homes and buildings for make them earthquake resistant. When investigations of tragedies revealed blatant code violations, many called for strengthening the roles of fire marshals and other public safety officials.

“We were conscious of the responsibility of being proactive without overreacting or being over-regulatory,” Doucette said. “We made an enormous effort to having a rational approach to building safety.”

Early Efforts Planted Seeds Of Later Successes

Doucette believes the awareness created by what became an annual tradition of Building Safety Week helped aid later pushes for handicapped accessible buildings and the use of energy efficient systems. Along the way, groups such as National Conference of States on Building Codes, the International Code Council, the Federal Alliance for Safe Homes, Inc. - FLASH and many other protection, prevention and watchdog groups joined in a larger crusade for safe, durable, sustainable and green structures. The work also helped bring about changes to protect nursing homes and eliminate or limit the use of many hazardous materials that ignite easily or give off toxic fumes when smoldering.

In the early days, however, the goal simply was to make homeowners more alert to the dangers in their own homes and to create more educated consumers who would demand better safety in homes and public structures.

About the time of the first Building Safety Week, another tragic accident occurred in Indianapolis. A youngster playing in his garage suffered extensive burns when he lit a sparkler that ignited vapors seeping from a malfunctioning gas heater.

Because of the gut-level reaction to stories such as those, many in the public also had a hunger to learn about safety precautions involving space heaters and combustible attics in multi-family buildings where fires could spread unnoticed during the night until a burning ceiling fell on those sleeping below.

Doucette noted that many of the features we take for granted today such as affordable smoke alarms in the home and fire-resistant materials were just starting to come into vogue when first Building Safety Week got underway.

He is happy that many newer homes have safety features such as fire sprinklers that seemed out of reach of the average consumer back then. Not only are more safety devices available, but they are seamlessly integrated into the design.

Although he has moved on to different work these days, Doucette, who still lives in Indianapolis, remains a safety advocate at heart.

“I’m a consumer (not a safety professional) today, but I still remember vividly what led to the need for Building Safety Week. I’m still very aware of safety features, and my wife and I often judge a hotel and whether we’ll stay in it by the safety features we see.”