



I-Team: Wisconsin Playing with Fire

March 23, 2009

Originally printed at <http://www.todaystmj4.com/features/iteam/41720447.html>

They could save your home, even your life, by stopping electrical fires before they start. It's a simple device that doesn't even cost that much.

But we found Wisconsin still playing politics, and playing with fire.

It only takes one spark to start a fire that rips through your walls. That's what happened inside a Bayside home recently, one of thousands of electrical fires in Wisconsin last year caused by damaged or deteriorated wiring.

"Fire will not just contain itself to one room," said North Shore Fire Department Deputy Chief Robert Whitaker. "The fire will move and it will go up into an attic, and once you get a fire into a wide open space, the fire moves. It grows quickly."

Hundreds of people die and thousands more are hurt in electrical fires every year. Everyone from fire investigators to electrical inspectors say a \$40 dollar device could prevent many of them.

"They've been tested and studied for a long time, and that's why they came up with them," explained Neil Matthes, a master electrician on staff at Waukesha County Technical College.

They're called arc-fault circuit interrupters, or AFCI's. Without getting too technical, an AFCI senses when wiring starts to spark and cuts off the power source.

Right now, 46 states require AFCI's in all new and remodeled homes -- a move some states started making as early as 2002. Only four states still don't. Wisconsin is one of them, because homebuilders pressured the state to put it off. Their argument: AFCI's are too expensive.

The Wisconsin Department of Commerce decides whether the state adopts nationally recognized electrical codes. We asked Zach Brandon, the Commerce Secretary's Executive Assistant, if cost should be an issue when it comes to safety measures.

"I think we always have to be cognizant of the overall impact it has on any industry," Brandon replied.

Metropolitan Builders Association Vice President, Patricia Stone, worries AFCI's will drive up home costs.

"Fire safety is important, but cost is also a consideration," Stone said.

That's why Stone spoke out against AFCI's at a public hearing last June. We asked Stone why oppose something that could potentially save lives.

"That's the argument people use for fire sprinklers, as well, in single family homes," said Stone.

But unlike expensive fire sprinkler systems, even the MBA figures, worst case, using AFCI's only adds about \$1000 the cost of most new homes -- a lot less than rebuilding.

Ultimately, the Department of Commerce reached a compromise and adopted the use of AFCI's into the state's electrical code, but the requirement won't go into effect until 2010, years after most other states.