

****MEDIA ADVISORY****



**** FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****
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NEMI task force finding life-saving answers to why buildings fail fire code standards.

“Houston, we have a problem...”

That’s how it began. A couple of conscientious individuals staring in disbelief at a pattern of life-threatening fire code violations.

Clint Gowan, an active member of the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA), works along side Douglas McGee, Sheet Metal Workers’ International Association’s (SMWIA) Local 54 in Houston. Together they learned that about 40% of the dampers in buildings in Houston failed to meet local and/or National Fire Code standards...and that *nothing was being done about it!*

The National Fire Code requires that fire dampers, fire actuators and stairwell pressurization and smoke control systems be certified and inspected at a minimum of every four years and for fire dampers and five years for stairwells and smoke control systems. That wasn’t being done, or, if it was, it wasn’t by a qualified contractor and some violations were ignored.

Gowan and McGee got on the phone to builders and contactors around the country and, call after call, they received the same answer: Other cities were experiencing a similar failure rate. Houston’s problem was a *national* problem.

One of the first calls made was to Michael Sullivan, SWMIA General President. Sullivan immediately contacted Erik Emblem, Executive Director of the National Energy Management Institute (NEMI), the research and development arm for the unionized sheet metal industry with a reputation as the “go-to” solution for energy problems.

Sullivan also contacted the NEMI Board of Directors who, after hearing the facts, instructed Emblem to establish a NEMI task force to study the situation. Gary Nelson, NEMI’s Senior Project Manager, was assigned to work with the Task Force to establish a program to inspect and repair deficiencies that would be acceptable to the building industry and fire/code officials.

Sullivan reached out to Harold Schaitberger, General President of the International Association of Fire Fighters who represent more than 267,000 professional firefighters and emergency medical personnel in the United States and Canada, whose members were most at

risk. Sullivan explained the problem and invited his members to take part in the task force discussions.

Houston city officials and fire marshals embraced the idea of NEMI as the vehicle to bring the various entities together to address the problem and to begin the process of strengthening the inspections of the fire codes.

The task force found that many of the problems began in the construction phase where installers of dampers and actuators often were not properly trained. “Sometimes after a damper is put in a wall, the architect makes a design change-- carpenters move the wall without ever notifying the mechanical people and when there’s a fire, there’s no fire damper,” said Nelson.

“We found electricians running conduits through fire dampers, a code violation—if a fire ever occurred in the link activated the fire damper could not close. Some dampers were installed ‘out of square’ meaning when it actuates, it doesn’t fall properly. Workers inspecting the fusible links on the dampers are finding that some of the installed damper access doors that are too small for them to gain access to the links. Further, the codes are ambiguous in establishing a required sizing of access doors. That is another problem we’re addressing.”

An executive committee from the NEMI task force met with Underwriters Laboratories (UL) in Chicago to begin deliberations on setting up a verification and certification system that UL would recommend to be implemented nationwide. UL is a trusted source for product compliance. They have tested product safety for more than 100 years.

“Working with UL, we’re going to develop a training and testing program for technicians who inspect, repair or replace the products,” said Nelson. “All of the details are not worked out at this time but one concept being considered is where technicians would be under the supervision of a certified supervisor (both working for a UL certified contractor). The certified supervisor would stamp the reports with a seal after reviewing the technician’s reports and verifying all the provisions of the applicable codes, as well as the requirements of NFPA 90, and UL are met. The report would be supplied to the “responsible” building operator, city fire marshal and city chief building official. Each damper would then have a certification in clear visibility attesting that the damper/apparatus has been tested in accordance with the procedures approved by UL. Our goal is to do our part to assure that all applicable code requirements are being met and the public and fire personnel are indeed entering a safe building.”

What Gowan and McGee set in motion in Houston is long overdue, said Nelson. “I’ve been a sheet metal worker all my life and this problem has existed since the day I was an apprentice”.

The NEMI task force is committed to completing this project in 2005.

The National Energy Management Institute (NEMI) is a not for profit organization sponsored by the Sheet Metal Workers’ International Association (SMWIA) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA). NEMI’s mission is to identify emerging markets and employment opportunities and to develop programs to capitalize on them.

