

01-13-17 Generators: They Give and They Take

The most extreme weather conditions, be they hot or cold, initiate the use of generators. The first time I responded to a call involving a generator, the complaint was regarding the noise. In that particular case, the complainer had a nerve to be the one complaining, (the clueless kind of nerve), considering that she owned the house and she had shut off the power to her tenants because she wanted them to leave A.S.A.P. She did not use “due process” for evicting them and she illegally shut off all power to her tenants, creating an emergency for them. The owner lived in the lower level and hadn’t foreseen the tenants would try to save their refrigerated food during that hot August weekend by using a generator. So, she called the police to complain about the noise. The nerve of those tenants making such a racket!

I was able to convince the owner that she absolutely had to immediately restore power to her tenants. Fortunately, the tenants were able to disconnect the generator on that Monday following a hot, noise-filled weekend. It was also fortunate for everyone in the building that the generator had been placed outdoors. The outdoor placement avoided the problem of carbon monoxide poisoning from the burning of fuel to power the generator.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), there were 391 fatalities from non-fire carbon monoxide exposure deaths reported to CPSC associated with engine-driven tools from 1999 to 2006. Generator use accounted for 334 of the 391 deaths (85%). What is especially tragic about those deaths is that they were all preventable. Just knowing that portable generators should never be used in an enclosed space can save lives. Knowing that the generator needs to be far away from windows and vents can save more lives. What distance is a safe distance? For a great video on this, see this one <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkO9PK4JvJI> produced by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). Finally, having carbon monoxide detectors and replacing the batteries every six months can save even more lives.

My second response to a call about the use of a generator was also because of noise. The neighbor, whose house was only about thirty feet away, could not sleep because the neighbor’s generator was kept running all night long, providing power for air conditioners, as well as lights and refrigerator. In that case, the noise was, in fact, a serious nuisance for the sleepless neighbor. The resolution would not be as speedy as in my other case, though, for this family had lost their power due to lack of payment to National Grid. It was summer and the shutoff for non-payment was legal. The generator was new and very large and it was at least outdoors. When I described the situation to my board, the co-chair, who is an electrician, pointed out the potential for dangers, depending on how it was being used. That is when I learned that it was not as easy as fueling the generator and plugging in anything you want.

While my first experiences were in the summer, winter also brings the challenges of power outages. Recent storms of 2016 killed several people due to carbon monoxide poisoning. That is tragic enough and, yet, it could have been worse. If the generator is not properly used it can cause fires and can even create a surge all the way back to the street with enough power to kill the utility worker trying to restore the electricity.

A qualified electrician can install a transfer switch to your home to allow for safe use of a generator for your homes' appliances. Without that transfer switch, the generator should not be attached directly to the building's circuit panel.

Hiring an electrician to make sure your back-up power is safe should also be permitted by your town's building department. The cost of the permit pays the town's wiring inspector to double check that work. Appreciation of inspections triggered by permits was one of the first lessons I learned when I started working at a town hall. People might spend thousands on renovations and yet skip a forty dollar fee to cover the cost of an inspection. That inspection can save lives.

Health agents are called out to all kinds of situations and even though we try to be prepared for that response, we don't always know what we are walking into. Sometimes we are given enough clues from the phone call/interview to be prepared; yet, there are other times when we look around to size up the scenario and realize we need assistance. When that is the case, one of my first inquiries is to the Building Department to check for permits. No permit means there is the potential for unsafe conditions.

For more information on the safe use of and the potential dangers of generators, see OSHA's and FEMA's websites. And then pass the word! Let's associate the word "generator" with giving rather than taking.

<http://www.usfa.fema.gov/citizens/co/generator.shtm>

http://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data_Hurricane_Facts/portable_generator_safety.pdf

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