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OPINION: MISSISSIPPIANS FAIL TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM FIRE

By State Fire Marshal Mike Chaney

JACKSON, Miss. – All too often, fire investigators call me about a fire death somewhere in Mississippi. I have to ask, “Did the victim have a working smoke alarm?” Sadly, in about half the cases we investigate the answer is “no.”

This is particularly disturbing to me because buying and maintaining a smoke alarm seems a small price to pay when your life hangs in the balance. Smoke alarms can cut your risk of dying in a fire in half. So far in 2019 there have been 25 fire deaths reported statewide. That’s a 41% decrease over this time last year. However, in at least 16 cases in 2019, there were no working smoke alarms.

To combat this, my office is distributing 23,526 smoke alarms to city and county fire departments throughout the state. Distribution began on Wednesday, May 15, 2019 when several departments picked up their alarms in Jackson. We’ll be hand delivering more smoke alarms in the coming weeks and there are still more smoke alarms available if a department wants to request some.

A county fire coordinator recently told me that his department had not been able to afford to buy smoke alarms and were dependent on what my office could give them. He went on to tell me that he believed there were many people in his county that couldn’t afford to buy an alarm. I’ve found that the elderly are particularly at risk of not having a working smoke alarm.

For several years, money to purchase smoke alarms has been tight. I would ask the legislature to consider allocating more funds in the future so that Mississippians could be better protected.

The smoke alarms we bought this year were purchased with grant money from FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security. Until the legislature sees fit to appropriate more money, my office will continue to apply for grants, even though those seem harder to come by these days.

Going forward, my staff will train departments on how to install the alarms, as needed. I would encourage anyone in need of a smoke alarm to call their local fire department or the State Fire Marshal’s Office at 601-359-1061.