

City fire deaths fall 23% for 10-year low

By Phillip J. O'Connor

Chicago had a 23.1 percent drop in total fire deaths in 1987 from the year before, including an 18.8 percent decrease in residential fire deaths, fire officials said. Both of last year's totals were the lowest in more than 10 years.

"We're just starting to see the turnaround in deaths and injuries," said Fire Commissioner Louis T. Galante, expressing pleasure with the 1987 decrease. "We want to see the number of fire deaths and injuries continue to drop."

Fire officials said increased use of smoke detectors was a major factor, but added many homes still don't have them, even though they have been required in all city residential buildings since late 1984.

The city recorded 106 total fire deaths last year, with 95 occurring in residential buildings. In 1986, the city had 138 total fire deaths, with 117 in residential buildings.

Discussing the 1987 drop, Ga-

lante said, "It has been more than four years of extremely hard work [since he became commissioner], both on the offensive [fire prevention and public education] and on the defensive [work by the fire suppression division]."

"We feel this decrease is also due to a third ingredient—public cooperation. . . . I want to stress that statistics are not important. The lives that are saved are [what's important]."

A Fire Department spokesman, Jerry Lawrence, urged Chicago residents who don't have smoke detectors to get them.

He said 72.6 percent of those who died in city residential fires last year were in homes that either contained no smoke detectors or had non-working detectors.

Of the 95 victims, 52 were in homes with no smoke detectors, while 17 others were in homes with non-working smoke detectors, Lawrence said. The other 26 victims were in residences that had work-

ing detectors, he added.

Lawrence said careless use of smoking materials was blamed for 28.4 percent of the city's fatal fires in 1987, while 18 percent were caused by defective or careless use of appliances, and 11.5 percent were caused by space heaters, usually with combustibles being placed too close to heaters.

Lawrence said the majority of Chicago's fire victims were very young or senior citizens, "the people who need protection of smoke detectors the most."

He said fire officials have been "finding more and more cases of smoke detectors not working, either because batteries were removed or batteries were dead."

On the positive side, "We're also hearing of more cases where smoke detectors alerted residents," he said. "The warning allowed the people to get out, call the Fire Department sooner, and eliminated or reduced the number of injuries."

Because smoke detectors provide

an early warning, fires can be contained before they spread, Lawrence said.

"We're seeing significant decreases in the number of structural fires and the number of fire injuries," Lawrence said. "The number of extra-alarm fires is down significantly."

Smoke detectors were one of the major reasons for the decreases, he said. Other reasons, he said, include the department's sending of more firefighters on initial alarms, "a better equipped fire department than ever before" and its public education program.

The city Inspectional Services Department has issued thousands of citations to landlords for not having working smoke detectors and a number of landlords have been fined or sentenced to attend a fire safety school, officials said.

A new state law effective Jan. 1 requires smoke detectors in new residential construction and in all existing residences by July 1.

