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Christie Administration Reminds Residents to Follow Generator Safety Guidelines

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Trenton, NJ – New Jersey Health Commissioner Cathleen D. Bennett reminds residents using portable generators during power outages to follow manufacturers' guidelines and safety precautions to reduce the risk of fire or carbon monoxide poisoning from improper use, refueling or storage of generators.

"In the weeks and months following Superstorm Sandy, we saw five carbon monoxide (CO) deaths in New Jersey due to the improper use of portable generators," said Commissioner Bennett. "CO poisoning is called the "silent killer" because it gives no warning – you can't see it and you can't smell it. It is critical for the public to recognize the signs of CO poisoning, which can produce headaches, sleepiness, fatigue, confusion and irritability at low levels. At higher levels, it can result in nausea, vomiting, irregular heartbeat, impaired vision and coordination and death."

In the two weeks following Superstorm Sandy, nearly 400 patients were treated for CO exposure in New Jersey's Emergency Departments, while only 14 patients were treated for exposure in the two weeks prior to the storm.

The New Jersey Department Community Affairs Division of Fire Safety also cautions that a working carbon monoxide alarm be present near sleeping areas, in addition to a conventional working smoke alarms.

"The presence of a working Carbon Monoxide alarm, with 10-year sealed lithium batteries in the home along with a working smoke alarm, is extra added protection against the threat of CO poisoning and fire during an extended storm related power outage," said William Kramer, Jr. Acting Director and State Fire Marshal.

Kramer adds that extreme caution should be exercised operating a gas powered, electrical generator during a power outage, especially plugging it into a household electrical outlet. That will result in "backfeeding" and presents an electrocution hazard to individuals operating it and to first responders.

In the two months following Sandy, the New Jersey Poison Information and Education System (NJPIES) received nearly 450 Sandy related calls. Of these calls, 324 were related to exposure to CO or contact with possibly toxic substances. Nationally, 81 people die each year due to CO poisoning from the use of a generator.

Additionally, residents should never use a grill, camp stove or other gasoline, propane, natural gas or charcoal burning device inside their home, basement, garage or even outside near an open window. The use of these devices can also cause dangerous levels of CO to build in a home.

If you suspect CO poisoning take immediate action including:

- Call 9-1-1 immediately if a person is not breathing, is unconscious or unresponsive, or is having seizures or convulsions

Exit the home/building/enclosed space immediately

Contact your local fire department

From a safe area, call the NJ Poison Experts at 800-222-1222, for immediate treatment advice.

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Safety tips when using generators include:

Never run a generator within a basement, garage or any enclosed or partially enclosed structure because the accumulation of carbon monoxide can be fatal

Never position a generator close to windows and doors

Use battery-operated carbon monoxide alarms. Test and change the batteries regularly

Never connect a generator directly to home wiring unless your home has been wired for generator use. This can cause backfeeding along power lines and electrocute anyone coming in contact with them, including line workers making repairs

Always plug appliances directly into generators

Use heavy-duty, outdoor-rated extension cords. Make sure extension cords are free of cuts or tears and the plug has three prongs.

Ensure your generator is properly grounded

Never overload a generator. A portable generator should only be used when necessary to power essential equipment or appliances

Turn off all equipment powered by a generator before shutting it down

Keep the generator dry. Operate it on a dry surface under an open structure

Always have a fully charged fire extinguisher nearby

Never fuel a generator while it is operating and wait until it is cool to the touch

Read and adhere to the manufacturer's instructions for safe operation

For more information on generator safety, please visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/co/>

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