

OPED

Recent events prove the need for extra CO detectors



**Bob
WILLIAMS**

In the past few months, we have had numerous incidents where people in commercial and public buildings were exposed to carbon monoxide, some with tragic results – most notably, the death of Steve Nelson, manager of Legal Sea Foods in Huntington Station, as the result of CO poisoning.

I listened to John Largan, Steve's partner, speak so passionately about the suffering Steve went through in the weeks before he finally succumbed. Even the doctors failed to diagnose his condition.

I also read about the advanced medical technician who recently went into a Dunkin' Donuts in Carle Place and happened to have a portable CO meter on his person that alerted him of a level of 35 PPM (parts per million) of CO while he was waiting in line for coffee. He evacuated the premises and the responding fire department found a clogged exhaust vent.

Both of these situations, in my opinion, started as chronic CO poisoning. Chronic CO poisoning usually involves lower levels of the gas in the air and lower blood CO concentrations. Exposure usually continues for many days and the boundaries between acute (one exposure lasting less than 24 hours) and chronic (exposures lasting 24 hours or more) are indistinct.

In case you're not aware, CO detectors and alarms listed by UL, the not-for-profit product-testing and safety organization, don't sound an alarm for conditions under 30 PPM. For conditions over 30 to 70 PPM, an alarm is not required to be sounded for these devices until after 30 days. That means, if the CO levels at Dunkin' Donuts remained the same and there were UL-listed detectors or alarms installed (with or without a digital display), the alarms would not have sounded until after 30 days.

The current UL standards are at odds with exposure limit thresholds of both the EPA (not to exceed 35 PPM in one hour or nine PPM in eight hours) and OSHA (not to exceed 50 PPM over eight hours). As of now, neither CO detectors nor CO alarms will activate or give any type of warning of

CO accumulation at recommended EPA and OSHA thresholds until 30 days.

The EPA issued a fact sheet on CO in January 2009 that listed older adults, persons with heart and respiratory problems and unborn children as especially at risk for CO poisoning, and many CO devices' literature lists disclaimers for coverage of those population classes with medical conditions.

**IT'S UNACCEPTABLE
TO WAIT. BY THE TIME
HELP ARRIVES,
IT MAY BE TOO LATE.**

On July 25, I wrote to UL's chief project engineer to express that the public has the right and the expectation to be alerted and made aware of the presence of chronic low-level carbon monoxide exposure. I recommended that a distinct audible and visible digital alert be added back to the requirements of UL standards – both were incor-

porated in the standards in 1993 but removed as a requirement in 1998.

Currently, if a person wants to get an alert to protect against low-level (30 PPM and below) CO exposure, he or she will need to purchase an additional low-level CO monitor that provides an alert at lower limits than UL-listed CO devices do. These low-level monitors are battery-operated and cannot be connected to an existing alarm system, but they give a low-level warning within minutes of a 10-to-30-PPM exposure event.

Therefore, I'm recommending the use of additional CO monitors that produce alerts below the UL requirements to supplement, not take the place of, the required alarms and detectors.

It is unacceptable to wait almost a month for an alarm condition, even if CO levels are beneath the UL threshold. By the time help arrives, it may be too late. Low-level CO detectors will ensure occupants' health and safety and prevent tragedies like what happened at Legal Sea Foods from occurring.

Williams is president of Briscoe Protective Systems Inc. and a 35-year industry veteran.