

Administrator Alert

*Policy updates & rule clarifications for Assisted Living,
Residential Care & Nursing Facilities*

Office of Licensing & Quality — Oregon Department of Human Services

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Fireplaces in Community Based Care

Fireplaces have become a fairly common feature in Assisted Living Facilities (ALF) and Residential Care Facilities (RCF). Fireplaces do add a homelike feel to any community. Fireplaces may be located within resident apartments as well as in common areas of a community. Until recently fireplace safety issues have not surfaced. During a recent survey surveyors noticed extreme heat on the metal portion surrounding the glass on two gas fireplaces at an ALF.

In reviewing the issue of fireplaces and the potential for burns, research indicates that depending upon the surface temperature and contact duration thermal burns to soft tissue can occur when exposed to temperatures above 115 degrees. The extent of damage depends upon surface temperature and contact duration. Surface temperatures of the fireplace glass fronts can reach 200 degrees within 6.5 minutes. Thirty minutes after turning off the fireplace temperature can continue to be at 122 degrees. The elderly are more vulnerable to burns due to their fragile skin.

The potential for thermal burns is based on the number of BTU's that each unit gives off. The higher the BTU means, the higher the heat level or temperature, thus the greater potential for burns. There are low temperature options for fireplaces which include:

- Gas fireplaces that are totally sealed unit behind fixed glass, with the installation of a screen and the screen does not get hot to touch. These units can put out as much as 24,000 BTU's.
- Gas logs installed within a regular fireplace unit can be equipped with glass and/or screens which do not get hot. It looks like a regular fireplace but with gas logs.



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- Electric fireplaces which plug into a 110 outlet, give out 5,000 BTU's and are only warm to touch. These are probably the safest units to use, and they are much less expensive to operate.

Currently there are no administrative rules addressing fireplaces in ALF's. Structural requirements for RCFs (OAR 411-054-0200 (7) (c) do address fireplaces, but only require that the standards for installation must meet the Oregon Mechanical Specialty Code. Rules also address that the covers, grates or screens on wall heaters must not exceed 120 degrees.

Subsequently, violations pertaining to fireplaces will be cited at OAR 411-054-0025 (1), Facility Operation.

For communities that have fireplaces located within resident apartments, the facility will need to evaluate the resident as to their ability to safely manage and operate the fireplace.

Action required:

For those communities that do not have low temperature fireplace(s), the facility should have a monitoring system in place to ensure that the glass and metal surfaces do not reach over 120 degrees Fahrenheit. This monitoring should occur if the fireplace is in an area where there would be incidental contact with residents, visitors and combustible materials. In addition, it is recommended that barriers to fireplaces such as guards, screens, or hearths be installed to prevent direct contact with the glass or metal surfaces of a fireplace for fireplaces that are not considered low temperature.

