

CHS applauds positive step for fire safety for deaf and hard of hearing

The Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) applauds the Government of Ontario's recent amendments to the Ontario Building Code that will require all new residential buildings – including apartments, condos, houses – to have their smoke and fire alarms include a visual component as of January 2015.

“We are pleased that the government has acted on our recommendations and has acknowledged that visual alarms are an important part of enhancing safety and security in new residential buildings,” says Chris Kenopic, President and CEO, Canadian Hearing Society. “This is a good start. However, there is more work to be done to ensure all buildings have alarms that include a visual component.”

Visual alarms for fire and smoke use a strobe light system in addition to sound, and can mean the difference between life and death for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Jo Ann Bentley, Program Director, Communication Devices and Accessibility Services at CHS, adds that the Ontario Building Code was amended in 2006 to require visual alarms in the public spaces of most buildings such as arenas, stadiums, hospitals, business offices, and other public venues.

“The recently announced amendments will see visual smoke and fire alarms installed in all new residential buildings. All of these changes are a testament to the hard work of many people, including community supporters, fire prevention officers, and community partners,” says Kenopic. “We want to thank the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for inviting us to participate on the Technical Advisory Committee to provide these recommendations that meet the needs of Ontarians who are Deaf and hard of hearing. We look forward to continuing to work with the government on accessibility initiatives.”

Kenopic states that in order for Ontario to be fully accessible to all people, all auditory alarms must be accessible by having a visual component, including carbon monoxide alarms.

While the recent amendments to the Ontario Building Code apply to newly constructed and extensively renovated buildings, in order for Ontario to reach the goals of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act by 2025, CHS says safety concerns in existing buildings must be addressed to ensure that all buildings are accessible for Deaf and hard of hearing residents.

CHS recommends that the government:

• Update the Ontario Fire Code to accept and endorse these accessibility requirements to have all smoke and fire alarms include a visual component.

• Update and amend both the Ontario Building Code and Ontario Fire Code to integrate carbon monoxide detectors with smoke and fire alarms to ensure all three have a visual component.

“For more than 20 years, CHS has advocated for fire prevention strategies and worked with community, fire prevention officers and government partners to help keep Deaf and hard of hearing Ontarians safe,” says Kenopic. “We will continue to advocate on behalf of our consumers and we thank all those community members and partners who have supported and continue to support these safety initiatives.”

CHS acknowledges the contributions of 7,000 community members who petitioned the government and some of whom shared their personal experiences on the need for visual alarms. CHS continues to work with and appreciates the support of Ontario's Fire Prevention Officers for their letters in support of visual alarms.