

Portable Heater Safety

The popularity of comfort heating devices and the ease of purchasing a wide array of inexpensive units makes it pretty convenient to pick one up to take the chill out of a room or two, or to help offset the heating bill. But so many times in the heat of the moment, something is done without thoroughly thinking out the potential consequences. On more than one occasion the Brockport Fire Department has been called out to a house fire in the Village that was attributed to the use of electrical space heaters. Luckily there have been no injuries, but the houses sustained enough damage to render them uninhabitable until repairs can be made.

Portable space heaters are not intended to heat large spaces nor are they intended as a replacement for a furnace or as an alternative for not having utility services provided. Most household heaters sold today can draw upwards of 12 to 13 amps when operating. Typical household electrical outlets, lighting circuits, etc., operate from a 15amp circuit breaker or fuse in the panel box. Plugging a space heater into an outlet that may already be sharing power supply elsewhere can easily trip a breaker when the heater is operating. The function of circuit breakers or fuses is to prevent drawing too much amperage through the wires. Without breakers or fuses, wires can overheat and catch fire. But even when breakers or fuses trip because they are functioning as designed, repeated hard draws through the wires can still result in the wires becoming overheated and they can still catch fire.

Most space heaters sold today are not designed to run for long periods of time and have other safety features such as tip-over shut-off protection. As well, they have been manufactured and tested or listed by UL (Underwriters Laboratories). If you wish to bring a portable heater into a rental property, you should first check with the property owner to see if it is permitted. Many landlords do not allow them. If it is acceptable to use one, you need know what outlet will be best suited to plug it into that can take the electrical draw, or it may be necessary to not use

or unplug another electrical item when the heater is running so as to have less amperage on the wiring system.

If you are looking to purchase or use a space heater, follow these guidelines – always select the right size heater for the space; opt for heaters with tip-over and overheat protection; shop for a heater with a safety certification; give heaters the proper amount of space from combustibles; plug the heater directly into an outlet; inspect and clean the unit regularly; unplug the heater when not in use or before going to bed; and read and follow all the operating instructions.

As always, assure that you have recently tested your operating smoke alarms and carbon-monoxide detectors – your life depends on them.

Scott C. Zarnstorff
Codes Officer
Village of Brockport

