

Maine's Novelty Lighter Law

Maine is the first state in the nation to enact legislation banning Novelty Lighters

A MESSAGE FROM THE STATE OF MAINE FIRE MARSHAL JOHN C. DEAN

The State of Maine has become the first state to prohibit the retail sale and distribution of novelty lighters. On March 24th Governor John E. Baldacci signed into law L.D. 2081, P.L. Chapter 510 "An Act to Prohibit the Retail Sale Distribution of Novelty Lighters." At his side stood 6-year-old Shane St. Pierre who was injured by a novelty lighter last June.

The bill was Sponsored by Representative Sykes of Harrison and supported by the State Fire Marshal's Office, the Maine Fire Chiefs Association, the Maine Fire Protection Services Commission, Maine Association of Insurance Companies, Pine State Trading Co., the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Maine Juvenile Fire Safety Collaborative, Maine's fire service, and the Dead River Company.

The bill passed both houses of the legislature easily and for good reason. According to the National Fire Protection Association, in 2002 children started an estimated 13,900 structure fires that caused an estimated 210 deaths, 1,250 injuries and \$339 million in direct property losses. Data compiled through the Maine Fire Incident Reporting System from 2000 to date, shows that juveniles are involved in the ignition of at least 1,568 fires. These fires in Maine accounted for 10 deaths, 50 civilian injuries, 19 fire service injuries, and \$27,605,753 in lost property.

The frequency of child fire related incidents alone attests to reality that children are curious and do, though not always, play with fire. Given the record of such events, the removal of cigarette lighters that look like toys only made sense. However, this is not solely a young-child issue.

Data collected in Oregon show an alarming trend starting in 2005 that the preferred ignition source in 70 percent of incidents was a lighter. This is up from 55 percent in 2002. Maine data shows that children under the age of 6, account for 7.9% of fire setting activity while children between 7 and 16 account for 85.6% of such fires.

Homes contain an abundance of products that can serve as fuel for deadly and destructive fires, and open flame – a birthday candle, lighters or matches – is a dangerous and destructive ignition source. Toy-like lighters by design have the characteristics that make them appealing and intriguing to adults and children alike. This presents a risk to our youth that is both unacceptable and preventable.

While attending a recent national forum to develop a national strategy for fire prevention, many participants congratulated me and requested copies of the bill and more information to see similar action be taken in their states. Like the fire safe cigarettes legislation, legislation prohibiting novelty lighters will likely be written and enacted in other states in the coming years.

I would like to extend the congratulations I received from participants at the Vision 20/20 Forum on Fire Prevention to Representative Sykes, Governor Baldacci, Maine's Legislature, Maine State Federation of Firefighters and all other supporters for their help in putting Maine first as a leader in this effort.
