

## ARTICLE

### You've Come a Long Way, Building Safety

By Jay Hamburg



*Thirty years ago, a few people were inspired to spread the word about building safety with an event that has now become an international, month-long celebration.*

Last year, Building Safety Week received positive proclamations

and official statements from the President of the United States and the governors, mayors and county officials of 31 states. More than 2,600 people in 17 countries pledged their support of the annual campaign that seeks to increase awareness for the crucial need to build and design safe, sustainable, green structures in the United States and around the world. And about 400 media outlets carried that message to an estimated 416 million viewers, listeners and readers.

After three decades of success, Building Safety Week is expanding to a month-long observance.

This year's Building Safety Month, presented by the International Code Council Foundation, will involve public officials, homeowners, disaster-mitigation professionals and schoolchildren at a higher rate than ever before.

As thousands of folks involved with the building and maintenance of safe and sustainable structures get ready to observe the 30th anniversary of Building Safety Week, it's a good time to take stock of how it all started.

It may be hard to imagine a time when attention to building safety and increased vigilance was not the norm. But in 1980, there was a real risk that the public might view Building Safety Week negatively – as a celebration of intrusive regulations and government red tape.

The goal of the first Building Safety Week was to increase acceptance of certain basic safety measures, the absence of which people faulted for recent disasters.

One example was the Northern Kentucky nightclub fire that killed 165 people a couple years earlier. Subsequent investigations found flagrant safety problems at that club that

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included insufficient exits that were poorly marked, substandard electrical wiring, and the lack of a firewall, sprinkler system and automatic fire alarm.

Such a scenario seems almost impossible to imagine today in the United States and other countries where public buildings have modern safety codes. But it was one of several tragedies that led the National Conference of States on Building Codes and Standards (NCSBCS) to conclude it was time to enlighten the public on the need for stronger enforcement of better codes.

Marty Doucette remembers it as an exciting time and important challenge. He was in charge of education and training in the office of then-Indiana State Building Commissioner Donald MacRae, one of the leaders of the NCSBCS. MacRae was in charge of the national push for the first Building Safety Week.

Other groups involved early on in creating and growing a National Building Safety Week include the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), the Council of American Building Officials (CABO), the International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO), the Southern Building Code Conference International (SBCCI), Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA), the American Gas Association (AGA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

### Tragedies the impetus for better safety

Even the office of the Indiana Building Commissioner owes its existence to a disaster, said Doucette, who now runs Pilgrim Companions, a company that acts as a watchdog and performance manager for U.S. Department of Defense contracts.

On Oct. 31, 1963, an explosion tore through the Indiana State Fairgrounds Coliseum in Indianapolis. The disaster killed 74 people and injured about 400 during the opening night of a *Holiday on Ice* show. The force of the explosion blew spectators out of their seats. Falling chunks of concrete crushed others. In one case, several members of the same family lost their lives.

An investigation revealed that a popcorn-warming device had ignited gas from a leaking propane tank. Several officials were accused of failing to protect public safety, but ultimately only one conviction was handed down and then eventually overturned, according to *The Indianapolis Star*.

In the wake of this tragedy, Indianapolis realized the inadequacy of its emergency planning, response and communications system and made upgrades. And as Doucette recalls, the state realized a need for stronger oversight in building safety, leading to creation of the office of the state building commissioner.

Around the time the first Building Safety Week occurred, there was another tragic accident in Indianapolis. A youngster playing in his garage suffered extensive burns when he lit a sparkler that ignited vapors seeping from a malfunctioning gas heater.

The public had a gut-level reaction to stories such as these, and a hunger to learn about safety precautions involving space heaters and combustible attics in multi-family buildings where fires could spread unnoticed during the night until a burning ceiling fell on those sleeping below. Homeowners also wanted to make sure that their gas appliances were constructed and installed safely.

In those days, many in the field feared it would take even greater disasters to get support for improving codes and enforcement.

"It was unfortunate that [the occurrence of] so many tragedies became the catalyst for change," Doucette said.

Doucette and his boss – along with some other safety officials nationwide – found themselves among the leading proponents of the first Building Safety Week. The message was simple then: Be proactive. Demand better safety features. Learn how to

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prevent tragedies at home.

He was pleased to see that members of the public showed a keen interest in many facets of disaster prevention that do not usually provoke a visceral reaction.

“People don’t get emotional hearing about the quality of an exiting system,” Doucette said. “But as the nightclub fire showed, it is vitally essential. Suddenly there was a heightened awareness of the [need for] quality construction and maintenance.”

Powerful earthquakes in California, Washington and Alaska during the 1960s and 1970s also got the public’s attention. There was a new interest in retrofitting homes and buildings to make them earthquake resistant. When investigations of tragedies revealed blatant code violations, many called for strengthening the roles of fire marshals and other public safety officials.

“We were conscious of the responsibility of being proactive without overreacting or being over-regulatory,” Doucette said. “We made an enormous effort to have a rational approach to building safety.”

### **Early Efforts Planted Seeds Of Later Successes**

Doucette believes the awareness created by what became an annual tradition of Building Safety Week helped aid later pushes for accessible facilities in buildings and the use of energy-efficient systems. Along the way, groups such as the National Conference of States on Building Codes, the International Code Council, the Federal Alliance for Safe Homes, Inc. (FLASH), and many other protection, prevention and watchdog groups joined in a larger crusade for safe, durable, sustainable and green structures. Their work also helped limit or eliminate the use of many hazardous materials that ignite easily or give off toxic fumes when smoldering, and bring more attention to safety issues at nursing homes.

In the early days, however, the goal simply was to make owners more aware of the dangers in their own homes and educate consumers to demand better safety in those homes and in public structures.

Doucette noted that many of the features we take for granted today, such as affordable smoke alarms for the home and fire-resistant materials, were just starting to come into vogue when first Building Safety Week got underway.

He is happy that many newer homes now have safety features such as fire sprinklers that seemed out of reach for the average consumer back then. Not only are more safety devices available, but builders and architects are seamlessly integrating them into the design.

Although he has moved on to different work these days, Doucette, who still lives in Indianapolis, remains a safety advocate at heart.

“I’m a consumer (not a safety professional) today, but I still remember vividly what led to the need for Building Safety Week. I’m still very aware of safety features, and my wife and I often judge a hotel and whether we’ll stay in it by the safety features we see.”

For more information about Building Safety Month, go to [www.buildingsafetymonth.org](http://www.buildingsafetymonth.org).



Jay Hamburg is an Orlando, Fla. -based freelance writer. For 29 years, he was a reporter and editor at various newspapers including the *Orlando Sentinel* and *The Tennessean* in *Nashville*.



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