Faulty Fireplace Conversion Sets Off Fatal House Fire

A firefighter died while fighting a house fire. He was in charge of the pumper truck crew which was called to a home.

The fire was caused by a fireplace insert which had been designed for an electrical heating unit but was modified for wood-burning purposes. As part of this homemade conversion, a thin concrete slab had been inserted over the wooden floor joists.

The homeowner had just used the fireplace for several hours to provide heat because of a gas furnace failure. Heat had transferred down through the concrete hearth to ignite the floor and the basement ceiling. The fire had spread across the basement ceiling and was ascending the stairs leading to the main floor dining room when the fatality occurred.

The firefighters had made a couple of unsuccessful attacks on the fire, through the front door and a rear porch. The victim was ordered to check the dining room area to make sure all firefighters had been evacuated because of the quickly advancing fire. It appears the victim fell down the basement staircase and was injured. He then tried to escape back up the basement stairs, but was overcome at the top of the stairs by heat and loss of air in his self-contained breathing apparatus.

A poorly coordinated assault on the fire and a lack of organized supervision were blamed in this fatality, as well as communication and equipment difficulties. But there is also a lesson for every homeowner in this fatal incident. Don’t take chances with makeshift heating devices such as this. Installations and conversions of heaters and fireplaces must be carried out by qualified personnel in accordance with local fire codes. Your local fire department will be pleased to inspect and offer advice about such projects.