

St. Paul fire chief to honor workers who installed sprinklers in public housing

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St. Paul Fire Chief Tim Butler will present community service awards to 23 St. Paul Public Housing Agency workers Wednesday, May 1, for their roles in a two-decade-long program to install fire sprinklers in all 16 of the agency's high-rise apartment buildings.

State building code has mandated sprinklers in new high-rise buildings since 1972, but the requirement was not retroactive. Though sprinklers weren't required in the PHA high-rise buildings when built, executive director Jon Gutzmann and his staff began in 1991 to voluntarily fit them all with sprinklers, the fire department said.

"The project took more than 20 years to complete because funding needed by the PHA withered during the recession," the department said in a press release.

Fires in high-rise buildings are dangerous for firefighters and labor-intensive to fight. Sprinklers reduce property damage 71 percent and provide occupants an 80 percent greater chance to survive a fire than with smoke detectors alone, according to the department.