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New Trend in Fire Prevention Spreads to Senior Housing Developments

Rowland Heights, Calif.—January 25, 2007--Modern homes for the aged are becoming a lot homier and less institutional than they used to be. Metal chairs and sterile linoleum floors are giving way to wall-to-wall carpet and plump upholstery, and some residents are choosing to outfit their rooms with a favorite easy chair from home, their own bedroom furniture and familiar pictures on the wall. While this nationwide trend makes life a lot cozier for residents, some of the changes are creating new fire hazards. No Burn of California has a solution that is being adopted by more and more administrators charged with insuring resident safety.

"What motivated us to buy No-Burn is that there was a product that could reduce the possibility of furniture or draperies igniting. It's an added layer of protection that we felt it would be worth us to have," said Ted Grant, administrator of Bethesda Home in Hayward, who began using No-Burn in early 2006.

"No-Burn is the only product I know of right now that's on the market that I could buy to do this," agreed Scott Polzin, who purchased No-Burn when he served as administrator of Casa de las Campanas in San Diego County. Polzin now is developing a new multi-level adult living facility, and considering No-Burn for the skilled nursing suite.

No-Burn has non-toxic, non-carcinogenic products that can be applied to the framing of new construction, painted on existing walls or sprayed on upholstery, curtains and other combustible material to help prevent a fire from igniting or spreading.

Polzin said furnishings purchased specifically for a home for the aged come with special fabrics that have been thoroughly treated with flame retardants. But residents increasingly are asking to add personal touches to their rooms.

"They could probably get away with bringing in a chair. But now you go into a room and they've got the couch, the chair, the bed. The fire marshal will question whether all this is flame retardant and of course they're just residential items. You're going to have to show it was treated, or it initially came with some fire retardant properties," Polzin said.

Jon Traw, a licensed fire protection engineer and partner in No Burn of California, said No Burn is responding to the problem.

"The owners and managers of these kinds of facilities are constantly wrestling with the question of how do I create the home-like environment yet how do I comply with regulations or prevent the materials that I'm bringing in from becoming fuel for a fire?" said Traw, who also is the former president and CEO of the International Conference of Building Officials, the organization which wrote and updates municipal uniform building and fire codes. "This trend, the desire to change and to make the setting more friendly, means that you're bringing more materials into a structure that might not otherwise be brought in and those materials are the type that are not well regulated."

Nationally, Grant said nursing homes have experienced devastating blazes from, for example, an illicit cigarette tossed in a garbage can that ignited curtains and bedding. His facility

recently applied No-Burn to upholstery and curtains to thwart that kind of incident. Grant said he also applies No-Burn to curtains after washing which reduces the original retardant properties.

Of course, fire prevention is especially important in residences for the aged. Many older people are not able to react and respond to an emergency as quickly as a younger person. Their ability to see and smell smoke, or recognize the sound of an alarm is reduced. Although automatic sprinkler systems often are considered a panacea, Traw said studies show the national failure rate for sprinklers is 11 percent and potentially higher in regions with special liabilities, including Southern California where earthquakes can cut water supplies.

"There's a segment of the design community and the regulatory community that is starting to ask the questions. Yes we're supporting good sprinkler systems. But are they in and of themselves the total answer. If you look at things rather objectively, the response would be probably not," Traw said.

"We operate on the idea that if somebody happens to drop a cigarette in a wastebasket and the wastebasket is next to a wall that is treated, the wastebasket may burn, may produce a level of smoke from the fuels that are in the wastebasket, but it may not extend beyond that initial point," Traw said. "The philosophy of fire retardants is to keep a potential fire to a very, very small size, not allow it to spread. And thus increase the time available between the ignition of the fire and it reaching untenable conditions."