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DLEG Offers Tips On Staying Safe After a Power Outage

JULY 31, 2008 – Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth Director Keith W. Cooley offers tips for consumers from the Public Service Commission and Bureau of Fire Services to stay safe while the power is out.

The US Fire Administration in the Federal Emergency Management Agency reports that carbon monoxide poisoning claims approximately 480 lives and sends another 15,200 people to hospital emergency rooms for treatment every year. After June's power outages, two Michigan deaths were reported as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning from using a generator in their basement and additional individuals in unrelated incidents reported symptoms of poisoning.

"We felt very strongly after hearing of these tragic circumstances, that we need to educate as many consumers as possible about home generator use as they are becoming increasingly popular and affordable," Cooley said. "During these emergency situations, homeowners can only think of one thing - just getting their power back on. We're here to say take a few minutes to think about safety to protect your family's health first and foremost - and then your home."

Cooley said one common mistake is that homeowners believe that opening windows or running fans will prevent carbon monoxide buildup which is inaccurate.

"Our firefighters know firsthand that carbon monoxide can build up quickly – without any warning signs or smells, so much so that it's considered a silent killer. The State Fire Marshal's office recommends that every home has at least one carbon monoxide detector located near the furnace and utility room," Cooley said.

While you can not smell carbon monoxide, it can cause symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, and weakness. If you experience these symptoms, get fresh air and seek help immediately for possible carbon monoxide poisoning in the local hospital ER where they will conduct a simple blood test.

The Public Service Commission offers an informative consumer alert http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mpsc/mpsc-ca_portablegenerator_211961_7.pdf on how to purchase the right generator with safety tips on proper use. Some tips include:

- Never operate a generator indoors or in an unventilated area. The exhaust contains deadly carbon monoxide fumes.

- Do not store gasoline for a generator indoors. Gasoline should be stored in an approved, non-glass safety container. Extinguish all flames or cigarettes when handling gasoline or the generator. Always have a fully charged, approved fire extinguisher located near the generator. Make sure you have enough fuel to run a generator for an extended period of time – during a power outage, gas stations may be closed.
- Never refuel a generator while it is running. Shut it off and let it cool for 10 minutes before refueling to minimize the danger of fire.
- Parts of the generator are very hot during operation. Avoid contact – especially with the muffler area. Keep children away at all times.
- Protect the generator from rain and other moisture sources to prevent electrocution.
- When not in use, store the generator in a dry location such as a garage or shed.

The PSC also recommends that homeowners put together an emergency use kit for their home to prepare for power outages. The kit should include:

- Flashlights
- Battery-powered radio
- Extra batteries
- Candles
- Blankets
- First-aid kit
- Nonperishable food
- Battery-operated lantern
- Drinking water – (1 gallon per person per day)
- Some emergency cash

The PSC recommends that you keep a list of emergency numbers near the telephone – including the number to the local electric company. Unless telephone lines are down, landline telephone service should remain available during an electrical power outage. Cellular service may not work if power to the cell tower system is disrupted.

It's also important to protect electrical items like TVs, VCRs, microwave ovens, or a home computer with voltage surge suppressors. If these items are not protected, unplug them before a storm begins to prevent damage.

For more tips on surviving a power outage, check out the PSC's alert at:

http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mpsc/mpsc-ca_survivingelectricoutages_211962_7.pdf

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