Portable Heater Safety in Construction

Portable heaters are commonly used to complete construction activities when permanent heat sources are not yet installed or available. The most common types use fuel, such as kerosene or propane, because they produce high BTUs. But electric heaters can also be found on a construction site, even though they are less common since they produce less heat and are less effective. The use of portable heaters brings a variety of hazards, including fire, carbon monoxide, improper refueling, burns and electrical shock. Proper safety precautions should be taken when they are used.

SAFETY TIPS FOR PORTABLE HEATERS

- Always read the owner's manual before using the heat source.
- Complete routine preventative maintenance as recommended by the manufacturer.
- Employees working in the vicinity of the heat source should be warned of potential hazards and possible exposure to burns. This can be the topic of a "tool box safety talk" prior to use of the heat source on-site.
- Be sure heaters are in good condition and operating properly. If a heater does not seem to be operating properly, discontinue use immediately.
- Only qualified persons should be allowed to set up and operate the heater.
- Disconnect the heater fuel source prior to making any repairs on it.
- Always use heaters in a well-ventilated area to prevent carbon monoxide build-up.
- If propane tanks are used as fuel, keep propane tanks upright, on a firm, level surface that is at least 6 feet from the heater.
- Maintain the recommended clearance from combustible materials made by the manufacturer.
- Since job site conditions change constantly, routinely review housekeeping for combustible materials that may have been moved near a heater.
- Do not place a heater directly on a plywood or combustible floor of any type. Instead, place it on a 4 x 4 foot square of fire-resistant drywall or cement board.
- Portable fire extinguishers should be readily available in the area where the heater is located.
- Hoses from fuel sources should be protected from physical damage and exposure to extreme heat.
- Hoses should not be run through a non-secured doorway because a closed door will pinch the hose, potentially causing damage. This could make it difficult for gas to flow into the heater or cause a leak in the hose, allowing fuel vapors to enter the surrounding work space. If a hose is run through a window, put a block on the sill to prevent the window from closing on and pinching the hose.

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- Never refuel a hot portable heater when the fuel port is attached to the device. Always allow it to cool before refueling.
- Never move or reposition a heater that is operating or hot. Shut off the heater and allow it to cool prior to moving to prevent burns.
- Do not leave an operating heater unattended overnight.
- Fuel should be stored away from other heat-producing devices in approved containers that are properly marked to identify the contents.
- When possible, purchase and use heaters with tip-over safety shut offs. Older-model heaters may not have this feature installed.
- Do not place a fan in front of a heater as the fan could overheat and cause a fire.
- GFCIs (ground fault circuit interrupters) should be used when electric heaters are used or preferred.
- When using electrical cords, always complete an inspection to ensure they are in good condition. Frayed or damage cords should never be used.

Portable heaters can be a valuable tool when temporary heat is needed on a construction site. Always follow proper safety procedures and the manufacturer's guidelines when a portable heater is used to prevent a variety of hazards. If additional information or assistance is needed, contact your UFG loss control representative.