

Promoting the Adoption of Radon-Resistant New Construction Codes

Kane County, Illinois

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Summary: Fred Carlson, Director of the Kane County Environmental Health Department, has strongly supported the municipalities in Kane County, IL, that wanted to adopt a code for radon-resistant new construction (RRNC). For more than 12 years, the county health department has provided radon outreach and education to local municipalities. Those that have successfully adopted an RRNC code for single-family homes and duplex residences include the communities of Batavia, Geneva, Montgomery, North Aurora, and St. Charles.

Educating Key Stakeholders: Kane County's radon outreach program accelerated in the early 1990s when it received a grant from the National Association of Counties (NACo). Because it was designated as an EPA Radon Zone 1 county, health officials recognized the need to hold public workshops about radon and the health risk from exposure to radon in indoor air. At first, Carlson experienced some resistance from local builders. Over time and with education, however, the builders grew more aware of the need for RRNC and began to ask for more information. Once builders realized that radon was a public health threat, they started adopting the new construction techniques and marketing their use of RRNC to new home buyers as a part of their standard sales pitch.

Code Adoption Process: Kane County's municipalities go through "building code adoptions" every few years when there is a new or revised International Residential Code (IRC). As changes in the IRC code arise, the codes committee (a subset of the town council) reviews the changes and recommends a course of action to the city council, including adoption of the RRNC appendix. The new or revised codes are discussed at a public meeting before the council makes a final decision.

Reasons for Success: Carlson believes that because Kane County builders were educated early on and made aware of radon risks in homes, they showed little resistance when RRNC appeared in town council building code discussions. The key action was inviting the builders, the mayors, and city council members to meetings. By orienting them to the issues, everyone understood the relatively minor, low-cost changes they could implement to protect public health.

Carlson estimates that up to two-thirds of builders within the county are using radon-resistant new construction techniques in their new homes either because of the code requirement or out of a general desire to do so. Since 1994, more than one-third of the homes built in Kane County have been constructed using radon-resistant techniques.