

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
COUNTY OF SUFFOLK

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Dear Editor,

As the cooler months approach and we turn on our heating systems, the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning increases. The tragic death of restaurant manager, Steven Nelson, should serve as a reminder to take proper measures to guard against the odorless, tasteless and toxic gas, also known as the “silent killer.”

As by-product of incomplete combustion from fossil fuel burning sources, there are many household items that may potentially produce carbon monoxide. Some examples of items that may produce the toxic gas include gas or wood burning stoves, gas fueled space heaters, furnaces, water heaters, gas and charcoal barbeques and gas, diesel or propane generators. Once carbon monoxide is present in the air, it is breathed in and the gas enters the blood stream the same way oxygen would. When exposed, the symptoms resemble the flu, including headaches, fatigue, nausea and drowsiness. High concentrations of carbon monoxide will cause severe headaches, difficulty in breathing, disorientation, loss of consciousness and even death. As what happened in the case of Steven Nelson, those sick from CO exposure are often misdiagnosed since the symptoms are similar. With this in mind, it is imperative that in the event that more than one individual in a household are experiencing such symptoms, carbon monoxide poisoning should be suspected.

To address the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning, I teamed up with Legislator Kennedy early this year and sponsored the Steve Nelson Safety Act which requires all county buildings to be equipped with carbon monoxide detectors. I want to encourage all homeowners to take the same measure to protect their families against exposure. Residents should be mindful that not all detectors are created equally. The typical CO detector is triggered at 70 parts per million (ppm) however, lower level exposure to the gas for an extended period of time can lead to chronic medical conditions such as fatigue and headaches. For the best protection, homeowners should purchase detectors that are equipped with digital readout screen that displays CO concentration levels as low as 5 to 10 ppm. Please remember to change the batteries of the monitors twice annually.

Other recommended safety measures include regular maintenance of heating equipment. Homeowners can log on to PSEG Long Island’s website at <https://www.psegliny.com/page.cfm/Efficiency/HomeEfficiency> for information on home energy assessments to be conducted by a Building Performance Institute (BPI) accredited contractor. The auditor can provide information of CO levels in your household. Homeowners should also request of their service technicians to test for CO once the service is complete.

While the dangers are real, carbon monoxide poisoning is completely preventable. I encourage everyone to educate themselves on how to keep their families safe and warm this winter.

Sincerely,

William R. Spencer, M.D.
Suffolk County Legislator
18th Legislative District