

Regulating Sprinkler Fitters: Controversy or Common Sense?

by Randy D. Roxson, Esq.

Regulating professions by government or private organizations is an interesting prospect. Who should be, and who should not be regulated most often promotes serious debate. Lines are usually drawn, and the fight begins. Whether installers of fire suppression life safety systems should be regulated, or not, has been no different.

Sprinkler Fitter Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship training is commonly used in the construction trades, and more specifically, the sprinkler fitter profession. But other professionals have required training programs as well, but do not call it “apprenticeship” training. Police officers have police academies, firefighters fire academies, lawyers law school, and doctors medical school.

Accountants ultimately become “certified”, nurses and engineers become “registered”, and lawyers and doctors become “licensed”. These terms mean that the individual, after becoming trained, have demonstrated they possess the necessary skills and qualification to engage in their profession.

But what would society think if only one lawyer of a law firm were required to be licensed, or only one doctor of an entire medical practice? Or, what if only one firefighter per fire engine were required to be trained?

Our society has an expectation that all of the latter professionals have been trained and tested prior to their working in their respective career fields. That makes sense, right? Well, some say no. There are those who believe that sprinkler fitters, whose profession it is to install life safety systems, need not be required to be skilled or to demonstrate they are qualified.

Unfortunately, some connect apprenticeship training only with “unions”, and tend to believe unions are bad. Unions, however do a very good job training its members through apprenticeship training agreements with its contractors, most of which are 5-year training programs.

But, other approved sprinkler fitter apprenticeship training programs are available as well. Unfortunately, as long as there is no requirement that sprinkler fitters demonstrate qualification, some sprinkler fitter apprenticeship training programs will be underutilized, or not utilized at all.

Licensing and Certification

In many states, a myriad of professions are required to be licensed or certified, but only after successful completion of a specified number of classroom training hours, work experience, and a written examination. Among them are hair stylists, smog technicians, pharmacy technicians, opticians, embalmers, dental assistants, landscape architects, court reporters, hemodialysis technicians, real estate appraisers, locksmiths, security guards, private investigators, automobile repossessioners, and on and on.

Yet today, in some states only the fire sprinkler company is required to be licensed. But, in these states anyone employed by the *licensed* company can install a fire suppression life safety system without demonstrating any skills or qualification. How does this protect the end-user? While a company license is necessary to ensure that it has insurance, it does nothing to ensure that the installer has the necessary skills and qualification to install a fire suppression life safety system.

And what about continuing education? Without requirements for continuing education, how does the installer keep up with the ever-evolving codes and standards?

In California, for example, the holder of the company license could essentially have 200 employees, be based in San Diego, and have projects some 800 miles north to the Oregon border. Yet, there is no legal requirement that the one person of the company who took the examination for the company license actually visit any of these projects. Where is the oversight while the fire suppression life safety system is being installed? Would anyone ever know if it were installed incorrectly? Is this properly protecting the end-user?

While NFPA 13 *Standard for the Installation of Sprinkler Systems* requires those who install fire suppression systems “*be knowledgeable and experienced*”, specific requirements as to what *knowledgeable and experienced* means, and how individual installers demonstrate they are *knowledgeable and experienced* are left to the authority having jurisdiction. When a jurisdiction fails to enact such specific requirements that determine who is and who is not qualified, it ultimately affects first responders and the occupants of buildings who may find themselves in need of an operable fire suppression life safety system.

Many states and local communities currently have various licensing or certification requirements that are intended to reduce the risk that a fire suppression life safety system is installed incorrectly. Some variation of sprinkler fitter licensing or certification exists in Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Denver, and Philadelphia.

Model Sprinkler Fitter Certification Act

In June 2009, the USA Sprinkler Fitters Association created a *Model Sprinkler Fitter Certification Act*. This model Act provides a program for which any state or local authority having jurisdiction could adopt, in total or with amendments. It provides basic model language for requiring all persons who work on a fire suppression system to meet minimum skill and training qualifications that demonstrate competency in the sprinkler fitter trade.

The key components created by the *Model Sprinkler Fitter Certification Act* is a Sprinkler Fitter Certification Board, Sprinkler Fitter Registry, and specific Sprinkler Fitter Certification requirements.

The USA Sprinkler Fitters Association believes that the proper installation and maintenance of fire suppression systems is not only critical to protecting life and property, it is also important for maintaining the integrity of the fire sprinkler industry. This work must be done correctly the first time, and all of the time. If a fire occurs and the sprinkler system fails to operate correctly, the consequences will be devastating, not only to lives and property, but to the sprinkler industry as a whole.

It is essential that any person who works on fire suppression systems have the required education and technical skills needed to ensure that these systems are properly installed and maintained in accordance with all applicable industry codes and standards. Continuing education, which is a component of the *Model Sprinkler Fitter Certification Act*, is also essential when considering the ever-evolving codes and standards.

Conclusion

So what does Sprinkler Fitter licensing or certification really mean? It means that the individual who actually installs fire suppression life safety systems have demonstrated to the satisfaction of the licensing or certifying agency they have completed an approved apprenticeship program and passed an examination, or are currently enrolled in an approved sprinkler fitter apprenticeship program. These are the necessary tools that ensure qualification.

Thereafter, the qualified sprinkler fitter will carry a license or certification card to make available to local fire officials upon request, and will identify the holder as meeting all terms and conditions for installing fire suppression life safety systems in that particular state or local jurisdiction.

Could a trained and qualified sprinkler fitter make a mistake? Sure, however trained sprinkler fitters will significantly reduce the risk or likelihood that a fire suppression life safety system is defectively installed. This is so with all professions.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the USA Sprinkler Fitters Association's *Model Sprinkler Fitter Certification Act*, please request a copy by e-mailing randy@usasprinklerfitters.org.

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Randy is a 1997 graduate of a California POST Basic police academy, and has an Associate in Arts degree in Fire Technology; a Bachelor in Arts degree in Political Science; and a Juris Doctorate degree. He has been a member of the State Bar of California and the 9th Circuit of the Federal Court, Eastern District since 1996.

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