



Michigan Foreclosed Homes May Pose a Fire Threat

The housing market is getting better in the state, right? Well, not so fast, there may be some bumps in the road.

With greater numbers of active home buyers, more people are now walking through vacant distressed-sale homes for the first time in many months, or even years in some cases. And those modern conveniences like natural gas and propane appliances can pose risks in homes that have sat empty for long periods of time.

Empty homes can attract appliance thieves, according to Larry Otto, chairman of the Michigan Propane Gas Association's Safety & Compliance committee. "Even some home owners will strip their foreclosed homes clean, ripping appliances right out of the walls. And that creates a real fire danger in homes heated by natural gas or propane."

Appliances may be torn out from the walls without unhooking the gas lines. And this can cause a gas leak in the house, presenting a dangerous situation.

According to Chief Bill Forbush, President of the Michigan Association of Fire Chiefs, there is a real danger of unsecured gas-powered appliances in foreclosed homes.

"Fires are reported in communities all over Michigan from such hazards, and fire chiefs urge residents to call 911 and their local gas supplier if they believe that they smell natural gas or propane. This can be even more important in rural communities where there are fewer passersby and incidents are more apt to go unreported," says Forbush.

The potential for a fire remains high in Michigan until the state's foreclosure rate is reduced. Michigan's home foreclosure rates have fallen for the past few years, partly because banks were more interested in short sales where homes are sold for less than what's owed on the mortgage.

The national foreclosure crisis hit Michigan particularly hard. Although the state foreclosure rate has slowed, Michigan still saw 70,000 foreclosures in the past year (between March 2012 and March 2013) for the third worst home foreclosure rate in the country.

Some recent good news shows Michigan outpacing the nation for residential foreclosure sales: 31 percent of state residential sales were foreclosures in 2012 compared to the national rate of 20 percent.

If this trend continues, Michigan will eventually reduce the record high number of these unsafe foreclosed homes.

In the meantime, anyone approaching a foreclosed home should first find out if the home's fuel supply is in working order.

Safety Steps when Entering a Foreclosed Home:

1. When approaching a foreclosed home, first locate the propane tank and obtain the phone number that is on the tank for the propane retailer. Call the retailer and ask whether the gas is on or off in the house.
2. Decide whether you want to turn off the service or continue the service. If you choose to continue the service, ask the propane retailer to conduct a safety check of the system.
3. If you can't reach the propane retailer that day, shut the tank off.

After you have taken the above steps each time you enter the house, you should also answer the following simple but important questions:

1. Is the temperature inside the house warm during cold winter months? If yes, that could indicate the gas is on and that the heater is working.
2. Do you smell gas? If you smell gas, leave the house immediately, turn off the tank, and call the propane dealer or the local fire department.
3. If the house appears to be safe (it's not warm inside and you don't smell gas), inspect the premises to make sure the appliances are intact.