

## Sign of concern raised over city's fire fatalities

### Attention-getter notes days between deaths, aims to be preventive

By Nikki Bussey

bussey@commercialappeal.com

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Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

This sign was recently put up outside Fire Station 11 on Union Avenue. The Fire Department hopes the message will cause residents to be more alert to fire hazards.

It's a small sign with a big job.

The sign was put up last week in front of Fire Station 11 on Union near McLean. It counts the number of days Memphis has gone without a fire fatality.

It's gotten a lot of attention.

"We've gotten a lot of calls noticing it," said Brier Turner, executive director of the Fire Museum of Memphis. "You know, 'Wow, what a great idea.'"

The museum wanted to bring attention to the number of fire fatalities in Memphis, and someone remembered the sign on Union Avenue in the 1950s and '60s that kept a tally of traffic fatalities.

The museum worked out a sponsorship with SunTrust Bank for the Union sign, and hopes to add other signs as funds are raised.

"Memphis has a high fire fatality rate," Turner said. With a rate of 18 per year, Memphis is one and a half times the national average, she said.

The red and white sign is modeled after the Memphis Fire Department shield and is topped with a replica of a Dalmatian wearing a fire hat.

On Monday, the sign showed 52 days since the last fatality, a 69-year-old woman who died in a fire March 6. The cause has not been determined.

Her death was one of three this year. Two brothers, ages 4 and 7, died in a fire early Jan. 1 after their mother left them alone to go to a New Year's Eve party.

"Our hope and desire is to bring attention to fire safety," said Memphis Deputy Fire Chief Alvin Benson. "Our philosophy is that one fire is one too many."

Last year there were 15 fire fatalities. In 2006 there were 25 deaths, a marked increase over 2004, when there were nine.

Perry Cathey, president of the Fire Fighters Association, said most household fires start from a lack of attention.

"It's mainly carelessness about food on the stove and smoking materials. And supervision. Unfortunately, children seemed to be amazed by fire," he said.

Cathey said one way to prevent carelessness is to get a smoke detector. Residents can apply for a free smoke detector at any fire station.

-- Nikki Bussey: 529-2609