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Are your ducts in a row?

Dryer-venting systems should be cleaned to reduce the risk of fire caused by lint buildup.

Jay Romano
New York Times Syndicate

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NEW YORK -- A 2003 study by the Consumer Product Safety Commission found that more than 15,000 fires in 1998, resulting in 20 deaths and 370 injuries, were attributable to overheated clothes dryers. Typically, the fires were caused by a buildup of lint in the dryer venting system.

Dryer-vent systems in most houses are no more than 5 or 10 feet long. But the venting systems in multifamily buildings (including co-ops and condominiums) can be hundreds of feet long and can contain decades-old accumulations of lint, fabric, small articles of clothing and just about anything else that can make its way from the dryer into the venting system.

"This is something most people never think about," says Stuart M. Saft, a Manhattan lawyer who is chairman of the Council of New York Cooperatives and Condominiums. "But when you have a building that's 70 years old and has a dryer venting system that hasn't been cleaned in years, you can be sure it's going to be full."

Saft says that in addition to being a potential fire hazard, accumulated debris can be a breeding ground for mold and can significantly reduce the efficiency of dryers.

Joel Greenberg, president of 1-800-Chute-Me, a vent-cleaning company in Montclair, N.J., agrees. "Only a handful of New York City's newer buildings are equipped with high-volume dryer exhaust systems," Greenberg says.

In most multifamily buildings, he says, dryers in laundry rooms are connected by flexible plastic or metal vent hoses to lint boxes, which are connected to a duct system that runs to the building's exterior.

Although the lint boxes were originally designed to be cleaned regularly, Greenberg says, many have been hidden behind walls or partitions, making access for cleaning difficult and putting the boxes "out of sight and out of mind."

"The lint box usually feeds into an exhaust system that runs through the interior of the building," he says, adding that usually the venting takes a circuitous route before it reaches daylight. "In one large building on the Upper East Side that we just worked on, the dryer exhaust system ran for 350 feet through walls, into mechanical rooms, past some street-level stores, and then through ceilings to a roof fan that hasn't worked in years."

Usually, Greenberg says, vent systems are not cleaned until the dryers stop working. So when the time comes to clean the system, it can yield a considerable amount of gunk.

"In one building, we took out 35 lawn-and-leaf bags full of lint," he says.

Cleaning a hidden ventilation system, he says, typically involves cutting holes in walls and ceilings to gain access to the ductwork and then sucking out the lint with a high-efficiency vacuum.

Depending on the job's complexity, he adds, the cost could range from a few hundred dollars to \$10,000 or more.

So who is responsible for cleaning the dryer venting system: the building owner or board or the laundry-room contractor?

"Usually, the contractors say it's the building's responsibility, and the building will say it's the contractor's responsibility," Greenberg says. "The result is that the venting doesn't get cleaned."

Saft says that while most laundry-room agreements do not address the issue, it is certainly a legitimate bargaining point in renegotiating a laundry-room contract.

"When you renegotiate, it's a good bet that the company will be replacing some machines," he says. "That would be a perfect time for the company to clean out the venting."

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