**When Disaster Strikes!**

**By Jessica Bennett**

 The end of the year is fast approaching and with it, one holiday that most people consider to be their favorite. Soon we will start seeing markers of the season; Houses lit up throughout town, the smell of wood smoke and pine trees, the hope (for some people) of softly falling snow, and the spirit of the season that gives a feeling that envelopes us like a warm hug from our favorite person. With the crisp smells of winter in the air, it is sometimes easy to forget the tragedies that can befall people near and far. Fire and suicide are two of the top crisis that effect families across the country during winter months due to the long hours of darkness and the bitter cold.

 You can help prevent these tragedies with a few simple tasks. Making sure that you clean out heaters, chimneys, dryer vents, and areas around pilot lights if you have them is the best way to prevent a problem before it starts. Dust and lint are highly flammable and burn very hot. Simply taking apart your heater or dryer, making sure the power to it is off first, and vacuuming all the debris out of it can help eliminate this as a source of danger in your home. Getting chimneys cleaned regularly is also extremely important in home maintenance and fire prevention. Creosote is a substance that builds up inside chimneys from slow burning and cooler burning fires. It is deposits of unburned material that sticks to the inside of your chimney. The more that builds up, the more flammable and dangerous it gets. Once it ignites, it burns very hot and can travel through your house without your knowledge using the attic and spaces between walls. This also causes damage to your chimney. Having your chimney professionally cleaned and inspected yearly is essential to home health and good burning fireplaces.

 With Christmas right around the corner, everyone is dusting off their decorations and picking out trees. Some key things to remember for safe decorating is to keep all heat sources at least three feet away from trees. Trees dry out very quickly making them highly flammable. Lab tests have shown that a regular Christmas tree can be completely involved in fire in about 15 seconds and can completely destroy the room it occupies in about one minute. Water your tree daily. This helps it from drying out so fast. Make sure to remove broken bulbs from light strands and don’t leave empty light sockets. Never put candles on or near trees. Don’t overload outlets or power strips and do not connect extension cords together. Pets and children love Christmas trees and should be watched carefully when around them. Make sure to turn off your tree lights before you leave the house or go to bed.

 There are a lot of people who feel lonely this time of year. That loneliness can sometimes lead to severe depression and if left uncared for, can result in suicide. Suicide and mental health problems are on the rise in the US and are legitimate issues people suffer from. Sometimes all it takes to prevent a suicide are some kind words spoken or a kind deed done for someone who is suffering. Kindness is the bottom line. If you or someone you know is considering suicide, you can contact the national suicide hotline for help at 1-800-273-8255. This is a 24/7 resource and can help with obtaining care or just someone to talk to. Invite a neighbor who lives alone to join in your family’s festivities or give a homeless person a meal. Donate to a food bank. There is no end to the kindness you can give to others in need.

 Having a safe and happy holiday season is up to you. It’s impossible to control or prevent every danger to you and your family, but doing what you can will make you better prepared to deal with those things as they come up. Remember to have your emergency kit prepared as the winter weather takes full effect and causes power outages. Spread the kindness and winter spirit to all those you encounter. From your firefighters and EMTs, we wish you hope and happiness throughout the season and a prosperous new year.