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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NYC Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire Reformed Labor Laws and Prompted Codes that Still Protect Building Occupants 100 Years Later

Factory fire that killed 146 garment workers led to stricter code enforcements

A New York City factory fire that killed 146 garment workers a century ago was the impetus for legislation advocating for tougher labor laws as well as building codes promoting safe working conditions.

March 25, 2011 marks the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire at the Asch Building, now called the Brown Building and part of New York University in lower Manhattan. Prior to September 11th, the Triangle Shirtwaist fire was the largest workplace disaster in the city's history.

In less than 30 minutes, 146 young women, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrants, perished in the blaze because exit doors had been locked making their evacuation impossible.

"This tragedy ushered in an era in which building codes were put into place to promote safe egress in all public spaces," said Mark Berger, chairman of the Codes and Government Affairs Committee for the Builders Hardware Manufacturers Association (BHMA).

"BHMA has taken a leading role in working with code-writing bodies to ensure that the standards that have been created are also reflected in the code process," said Berger, president and chief product officer for Securitech. "The great effort now is creating mechanisms to ensure that emergency doors are regularly inspected for functionality and compliance, as required by code."

The deadly fire started on the eighth floor when a cigarette or a match was thrown in a bin full of flammable fabric scraps and quickly spread to shirtwaist patterns made of tissue paper that hung above the worktables.

The fire quickly engulfed the ninth- and tenth-floors when an air shaft at the rear of the building funneled smoke and flames trapping workers inside and causing some to jump out of the windows to their deaths.

Exit doors had been locked as a theft deterrent because it was believed that garment workers were stealing. However, Berger said there was a New York State labor law prohibiting such practices at that time.

“There was a requirement that doors to work spaces had to remain unlocked while a facility was occupied,” Berger said. “This is the same basis of all codes which followed, with the creation of emergency exit hardware and their required uses as the major code improvement.”

Other contributing factors included blocked staircases and an inadequate fire escape that didn't have a drop ladder installed. What compounded the problem further was that the fire truck ladders only reached the sixth floor.

Today, code enforcement and vigilance is key to life safety and security for any building owner. A good example of this is the September 11th tragedy, where 95 percent of the people working below the impact area of the Twin Towers were evacuated safely, as a result of vigilant adherence to the codes requiring unimpeded access to working exit doors, Berger said.

About BHMA:

The Builders Hardware Manufacturers Association (BHMA) is an industry leader in building safety and security. BHMA is the only organization accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) to develop and maintain performance standards for locks, closers, exit devices and other builders hardware. The widely known ANSI/BHMA A156 series of standards describes and establishes the features and criteria for specific types of hardware products. In addition, BHMA sponsors third-party certification of hardware products, which is a requirement for a product to bear the “BHMA Certified” mark — insuring that the product meets the ANSI/BHMA standard. For more information on BHMA, please write to BHMA, 355 Lexington Avenue, 15th Floor, New York, NY, 10017 or visit the Web site at www.buildershardware.com.

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