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March 25 Marks 100th Anniversary of the Deadly Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

*Inadequate Building Design Contributed to Deaths of 146 People in New York City Sweatshop*

**BETHESDA, MD** – March 10, 2011 – In the late afternoon of Saturday, March 25, 1911, a fire broke out in Manhattan’s Triangle Shirtwaist Company. As a result of this catastrophic fire, 146 garment workers died and many more were injured.

The fire, which occurred 100 years ago, still remains one of the deadliest fires in the history of the United States.

“Poor fire protection design was a major contributing factor to the significant number of deaths,” said Chris Jelenewicz, Engineering Program Manager with the Society of Fire Protection Engineers. “The Triangle Fire shocked the world and it shaped the way fire protection engineers currently design ways to protect people from fire.”

The Triangle Company occupied the top three floors of the 10-story Asch Building. The majority of the occupants were young immigrant females who operated sewing machines on the 8th and 9th floors.

The fire started on the eighth floor in a box that was used to collect scraps of cloth and quickly spread to a large table used to cut fabric. When the fire was first observed, the employees unsuccessfully tried to extinguish the fire. While the employees tried to extinguish the fire, it quickly spread throughout the 8th floor.

When the occupants tried to evacuate, they found there wasn’t a sufficient number of fire exits. More importantly, the exits that did exist were flawed. For example, evacuation was slowed because the doors to the interior exit stairs swung against the direction of exit travel. Some of these exit doors were locked. Additionally, an outside fire escape was narrow and it collapsed because it could not support the weight of the many people who tried to use it.

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Moreover, the building was not adequately protected by a fire suppression system nor did the building have an adequate means to notify occupants that a fire existed in the building. As a result, evacuation of the 9th and 10th floors was delayed.

Once the fire department arrived on the scene, their ladders could only reach the sixth floor. Many of the workers tried to jump into the fire department nets but these nets were quickly damaged when too many people tried to jump into the nets at one time.

“Because the fire exits were deficient, a lack of a fire suppression system and the delay in notification, the occupants did not have enough time to get out alive,” said Jelenewicz. “With no way out, many of the occupants were forced to jump out windows and died when their bodies plummeted to the ground.”

Today, modern fire protection engineering principles are more focused on protecting people from fire. When designing buildings, fire protection engineers use the latest technologies to design systems that control fires, alert people to danger, and provide a safe means for escape.

“A hundred years later, the Triangle Fire reminds us of the threat that is posed by fire and the importance of designing buildings that keep people safe from fire,” said Jelenewicz. “Today, because of the hard work that is performed everyday by fire protection engineers, our buildings are much better protected so that tragic events such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire will never happen again.”

**What is a Fire Protection Engineer?**

According to the Society of Fire Protection Engineers, a fire protection engineer applies science and engineering principles to protect people, homes, workplaces, the economy and the environment from the devastating effects of fires. Fire protection engineers analyze how buildings are used, how fires start and grow, and how fires affect people and property. Fire protection engineers also work closely with other professionals, including engineers of other disciplines, architects, state and local building officials, and local fire departments to build fire safe communities. Fire protection engineers are in high demand. The number of available jobs far exceeds the supply.

**About Society of Fire Protection Engineers**

Organized in 1950, the Society of Fire Protection Engineers (SFPE) is the professional organization that represents engineers engaged in fire protection worldwide. Through its membership of over 5,000 professionals and 65 international chapters, SFPE advances the science and practice of fire protection engineering while maintaining a high ethical standard. SFPE and its members serve to make the world a safer place by reducing the burden of unwanted fire through the application of science and technology.

More information about SFPE can be found at [www.sfpe.org](http://www.sfpe.org).

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*Advancing the Science and Practice of Fire Protection Engineering Internationally*