

Licensed to pipe

W.Va. plumbers need certification to work, starting in 2009

August 24, 2008, By Sarah K. Winn, Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Starting in 2009, anyone working in the plumbing business in West Virginia will need a license. The new code is intended to protect consumers and workers, officials and workers said.

"It sets a standard, a bar of competence," said Tim "Squirrel" Jividen, the union representative for the West Virginia State Pipe Trades Association.

While the new code requires that plumbers must pass a skills test for the licensing, experienced plumbers have until July 2, 2009, to apply for a license without taking the exam.

They must prove work history and certify experience. For a plumber in training classification, applicants will have less than 8,000 hours of plumbing experience. A journeyman classification is a person with at least 8,000 hours of experience, and a master plumber has at least 12,000 hours of experience. The yearly fee is \$75, but supporters hope to make it a three-year license for \$150 in the future.

After July 2, 2009, all plumbing workers must take an exam, no matter what their experience level.

The West Virginia Division of Labor started processing applications July 1, director of licensing Mitch Woodrum said. More than 1,100 applications have been filed so far, he said.

According to the new code, all plumbing workers must have a license with them on the job. If they are caught without one, the state Division of Labor will issue a cease-and-desist order. Subsequent offenses include misdemeanor charges, jail time and fines.

Getting the licensing approved by the Legislature has taken five years, Jividen said. Some of the resistance came from rental property owners and homebuilders, who were concerned about the possible price increases in work, he said.

The licensing requirements were patterned after the electrician licensing and provide the industry a couple of things, Jividen said.

First, customers can be assured that they have a trained professional working at their home or business, he said.

Jim Lewis, former commissioner of the state Division of Labor and now training coordinator for the local plumbers and pipe fitters union in Parkersburg, said many licensing codes are created from consumer protection.

"It's an education process not only for the people that do the work, but also those that get the work done," he said.

Second, the licensing gives West Virginia-based plumbers the opportunity to work in states that require licensing, Jividen said.

Steve White, head of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, agreed.

"When our workers go to Kentucky or Maryland, they have to have a license," he said. "It's kind of a competitive disadvantage to not have one."

Both Jividen and White said that real plumbing work is more than just unclogging a sink.

In short, plumbing is the installation of piping and accompanying fixtures for water systems, medical gas systems, fuel oil and natural gas.

"Plumbing is not just changing a washing machine," White said. "Fixing a sink is not plumbing - moving a sink is."

There are some exceptions to the licensing, including those doing work on their own or at a family member's home and an employee who performs work at a manufacturing plant, a public utility, a coal mine, industrial or natural gas plant.

Also, employees of appliance retailers are exempt, as well as those working on water or drainage lines outside of water treatment plants and those who perform plumbing work while installing heating and cooling systems.

Over at CAMC Memorial Hospital's new addition, workers with West Virginia Heating and Cooling were working on putting in medical gas lines on Thursday.

"It's a good thing, the licensing," said 20-year veteran Don Walters as he took a break from welding medical gas lines. "It helps keep the mistakes down if you have education."

James George, a fifth-year apprentice in pipefitting, agreed.

"A lot of people think anybody can do it [plumbing]," he said. "With the licensing and training, there will be less screw-ups."

To learn more about the licensing, call the West Virginia Division of Labor at 304-558-7890 or visit www.wvlabor.org.

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