

Testing, testing

U-M expert says radon threat isn't panic situation

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

Tests conducted by the American Lung Association of Southeastern Michigan show that Oakland County has more homes with dangerous levels of radon than Wayne or Macomb counties.

Owners should carefully test their homes but shouldn't panic, an expert said.

"This isn't a situation that deserves panic," said Arnold Jacobson, a professor of radiological health in University of Michigan's department of environmental and industrial health.

Jacobson is also director of the Radon Resource and Training Center at the U-M, one of three in the nation. It's financed by the Environmental Protection Agency and locally by the Michigan Department of Health.

County group wins \$75,000

The Oakland County branch of the Association for Retarded Citizens has received a \$75,000 grant from the Skillman Foundation for second-year funding of its Shared Parenting program.

Shared Parenting was started to alleviate the burden of a family in caring for their handicapped child. Caring for a child with special needs can sap a family's energy and resources.

Shared Parenting recruits a second family to assist in the care of the handicapped child. By providing a maximum of 180 days of relief through the second family, the Shared Parenting Program hopes to

LAST WEEK, the American Lung Association of Southeastern Michigan released the results of its three-county survey, which indicated that 24 percent of 2,663 Oakland County homes tested showed unsafe levels of radon.

Rochester, Rochester Hills, Wixom, Walled Lake, Auburn Hills and Novi showed the highest percentage of homes with unacceptable radon levels in the county. Four picocuries per liter of air is the accepted high safe level of radon.

In Wayne County, the survey shows 12.6 percent of 1,604 homes tested as unsafe. In Macomb County, where 607 homes participated in the study, 8.0 percent were considered to have dangerous radon levels.

On the national level, Michigan ranks as a state with a moderate amount of radon. Iowa, North Dakota, Minnesota and Pennsylvania are considered hot spots.

HIGH RADON levels in a home represent a serious health threat. Radon is a chemically inert but radioactive gas that's pulled into and trapped in a house through cracks in the basement, sump pumps, electrical wiring and sewers. It's associated with lung cancer.

Interim federal guidelines covering radon testing in school buildings have reached the comment and review stage, according to Dennis Hahn, chief of nuclear facilities and environmental monitoring for the Michigan Department of Health.

Some school districts, such as Bloomfield Hills, tested for radon two years ago, according to Jack Humble, who manages the district's plant operations. At that time, the tests didn't show unsatisfactory levels of radon in classrooms.

Produced by decaying uranium, radon has been blamed for the high lung cancer rate among uranium miners in Europe, the United States and Canada, according to Jacobson. When the mines were ventilated, he said, the lung cancer rates decreased.

Because radon's source, uranium, is in the outside soil, it's difficult to predict without testing which home has a high level. Just because a house has high or low levels of radon doesn't assure that neighboring buildings will test the same, Jacobson said.

plans to turn it into livable area, the kits should be placed in two different areas of the house, where people spend time.

Take care to keep the tests at least two feet off the floor and away from the sump pump, drains, walls and ceiling. Keep it toward the middle of the room, but avoid humid areas such as laundry rooms. Charcoal responds negatively to humidity, so test results could come out higher than they really are. If a dehumidifier is normally used in a basement, keep it on during testing.

"The drier the better," Jacobson said.

Windows, doors and fans should be shut for 12 hours before the test, which generally takes two to three days. In Michigan, the weather makes such testing bearable beginning in October.

placed in a low area of the home, a second should be left in a frequently used area. There will be a difference in levels recorded in winter when the house is closed up and summer when windows are open.

Use the results of both tests to determine what work needs to be done in the home.

"Only after long-term careful screening should you call in a contractor," Jacobson said. "Don't move on a single charcoal measurement. It's foolish."

FOR HIS part, Jacobson doesn't entirely trust the tests available in hardware stores.

"I don't know if all the labs have passed the Environmental Protection Agency's proficiency test," he said.

The test is a voluntary program. Jacobson advises consumers to obtain a list of labs that have passed the test from the local health department. Oakland County Department of Health has a list dated 1986. Jacobson recommends calling the Washtenaw department.

The Oakland County Health department has two employees who have gone through the Radon Resource and Training Center program and will field questions.

Where test kits are available

The American Lung Association of Southeastern Michigan and the Washtenaw Department of Health make test canisters available to the public. The Oakland County Department of Health refers calls for canisters to the lung association in Southfield.

Kits are about \$15 from the association. That covers the cost of purchasing the test and analyzing the results, according to Robert Long, administrative assistant in the Oakland County Department of Health's environmental health services division.

Consumers are advised that some kits purchased in stores require a second fee to cover analysis.

OCC board chairwoman wins award

Sandra L. Ritter, chairwoman of the Oakland Community College Board of Trustees, has been named winner of the 1989 Central Region Leadership Award by the Board of Directors of the Association of Community College Trustees.

The ACCT is a non-profit organization representing 6,000 trustees comprising the governing boards of more than 800 North American public and private community and technical colleges. The award was presented to Ritter at the organization's nine-state Central Region Seminar in St. Louis on June 24.

"In receiving the Central Regional Leadership Award Ritter is automatically nominated for the ACCT's M. Dale Ensign Award, which honors the organization's outstanding trustee for 1989. The Ensign award winner will be named at the ACCT national convention in September."

Said OCC Chancellor R. Stephen Nicholson of Ritter's nomination, "After almost forty years of working with elected and volunteer boards... I find Sandra Ritter to be one of the most faithful and dedicated board members I have ever known."

Few persons in our trustee associations understand the local, state or national legislative process as well."

Ritter, who lives in Waterford, was first elected to the Oakland Community College Board in 1978. Her board colleagues voted her vice-chairman in 1985 and chairman in 1986. Originally a teacher, she is currently a higher education consultant for the Michigan Department of Education.

keep the child in a home and active family environment.

Second-year funding will enable the program to expand to an additional six families with continued services to the initial six families already participating.

The Skillman Foundation was founded in December of 1960 by Rose P. Skillman, widow of Robert H. Skillman, vice president and director of Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Co. The foundation is a private, grant-making foundation with assets totaling \$275 million. The group, which awards grants throughout southeastern Michigan, is headquartered in Detroit.

ACCURATELY CHECKING for radon is a two-step process, according to Jacobson. Homeowners should first obtain two charcoal test kits to ensure accuracy.

Kits should be placed in the lowest livable area of the home. If the basement is unused and there aren't any

If a reading comes back greater than four picocuries per liter, use an alpha track test. It should be left hanging for preferably a year but if the homeowner is anxious it should be left at least one month, according to Jacobson.

Ideally, one alpha test should be

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