



Contractor Fights Refrigerant Huffing, Theft

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FORT MYERS, Fla. - Every year there was at least one unexplainable low-refrigerant service call, but when more than 10 occurred in 2009, executives at HVAC contractor Advanced Air and Refrigeration suspected more than phantom leaks that were difficult to find.

Professional thieves, who have been stealing R-22 and R-410A nationally, were service manager Ronda Szymanski's initial suspects. However, when a company service tech found a butter knife laying next to a central air conditioning condenser depleted of refrigerant, and its service port visibly damaged, Szymanski knew the loss was due to huffing. She suspected that the trend of inhaling refrigerants for a free high, which has killed hundreds of teenagers nationally, had finally reached Fort Myers, Fla., where Advanced Air has run a family HVAC service contracting firm for 25 years.

"I researched huffing on the Internet and realized it was no longer somebody else's problem; our own customers were being victimized," said Szymanski.

The company immediately made a service policy change. All new and replacement units now get a locking, tamper-resistant Novent refrigerant service port locking cap (distributed by Airtec Products, Fall River, Mass.). Every service call customer gets a product brochure and an installation option. Additionally, the company's next tri-annual, six-page customer newsletter will include a locking cap story.

Florida Cooling Supply, Clearwater, Fla., introduced the cap to Advanced Air. Szymanski bought one, installed it on her own central air condenser, and challenged her own teenage boy to try and remove it. The locking cap won the battle. "I don't want to sell something to customers that I haven't tried myself," she explained.

Wyatt Schwartz, branch manager of Florida Cooling Supply, said as many as 15 contractors are regularly buying locking caps from the Fort Myers location, but Advanced Air is leading the sales trend by far with more than 100 sales. Five of the supplier's other branches are carrying locking caps.

POSSIBLE MANDATE

"After the news media (*Naples Daily News*) reported the recent death of a local youth, interest escalated and now local code jurisdictions are proposing a locking cap mandate for air conditioning condensers," said Schwartz. "We're expecting a continual increase of sales and

interest in this product.”

United Parents to Restrict Open Access to Refrigerant (UPROAR), a parental activist group with members who have lost children to refrigerant huffing, said it is lobbying building code groups successfully, actively recommending locking refrigerant cap technology to parents with a nationwide campaign.

Locking caps already comply with the International Mechanical Code (Section 1101-10) and the International Residential Code (Section M1411-6), which mandate tamper-resistant outdoor access ports for all new air conditioning and refrigeration installations. The locking caps can only be removed with a special key available to licensed technicians through HVAC distributors. Szymanski has outfitted each of the company’s five service truck key rings with the key.

Locking caps are color coded green for R-22, pink for R-410A, and silver for all refrigerant types. Szymanski stocks only the universal caps on trucks and manually marks them with a system’s respective refrigerant.

Advanced Air service techs are said to have a 10 percent success rate when presenting locking caps to clients. Now that Airtec Products provides brochures, Szymanski expects a 40 to 50 percent success rate increase. Commercial sales, which represent 20 percent of the business, have not been as successful because many retail and restaurant chain locations Advanced Air maintains have absentee decision-makers in difficult-to-reach regional offices.

SAFETY FIRST

The locking cap is just part of the contractor’s continual progression of providing customers with safety and equipment-protection products. Other offerings include the Trane anchoring system to protect against hurricane damage; SUPCO surge protectors, because Florida is the lightning capital of the world; and float switches to prevent condensate drain overflows onto property.

The locking cap offers a win/win situation. The contractor bolsters sales with a new product, and consumers get peace of mind knowing their refrigerant won’t fall into the hands of thieves or huffers.

“It’s hard for a contractor to realize the importance of locking caps until they start seeing an abnormal rate of low refrigerant service calls like we did,” Szymanski said.

For more information, visit www.advanced-air.com, or www.airtecproducts.com.

Sidebar: In an UPROAR

UPROAR was founded by Mona Casey, a resident of Naples, Fla., after losing her son, Charles Ian Gray, to refrigerant inhalation. Prior to losing Charles, Casey and her family knew nothing

about huffing refrigerant. Rather than being defeated by this tragedy, the Caseys were impelled to do something about it.

Since then Casey has embarked on a mission to bring the issue to the attention of the public, the industry, and the government. She has spoken at national conferences, is the proponent of numerous code proposals to lock up refrigerant (two of which have passed), has made numerous media appearances, and has spoken to different groups via her membership in various anti-drug organizations.

She continues to fight and vows to do so, until concrete solutions to address the issue of open access to refrigerant by unauthorized individuals is deeply embedded in the system.

For more information, visit www.uproar.org.

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