"GENERATORS – GOOD INSURANCE FOR NATURAL DISASTERS"

Another year, another blackout. In Queens, New York, aging high-voltage feeder cables - overworked by increasing demands for electricity on a hot summer night in July - plunged areas of the borough into darkness. 100,000 residents were left without electricity for up to nine days in the sweltering city heat.

The incident, while tiny in comparison to the massive blackout of 2003 that left 50 million people across the Northeast and parts of Canada in the dark, serves as a reminder of just how dependent we are on electricity to keep the essentials – air conditioners, refrigerators, and computers – running at our homes and businesses, and how vulnerable we are to extreme weather.

While we are far away from New York and Canada, we here in East Texas also rely on generators due to hurricanes, flooding and ice storms. Though we hope to never experience any of this in the near future, we do want to be prepared for any type of natural disaster.

That's why more and more people are choosing to have a portable generator on hand as insurance. These are available in sizes ranging from small gasoline-powered models for the home, to powerful natural gas or diesel units rated for commercial or industrial use. But before you rush out to buy one, there are some things that the Leviton Institute recommends you keep in mind.

Watts Up? The first thing to do is determine what size generator is right for you. First, make a list of appliances and lights that are absolutely essential to keep running in the event of a blackout. Then add up their total wattage. Keep in mind that motor-driven appliances like refrigerators or freezers need four times as much power to start as they do to run, so be sure your generator can provide that extra wattage.

For example, if a refrigerator is rated at 400 watts, it will require 1600 watts to start; starting with less wattage could damage or burn out the motor. If you're running a refrigerator and freezer that might start at the same time, then you must add both their wattages and multiply that amount by four to be on the safe side, then select the generator with the nearest higher rating.

Generator Do's and Don'ts: DO plug appliances directly into the generator if possible, or use an outdoor, heavy-duty extension cord rated no less than the wattage of the sum of all connected appliances (wattage = amperage x 125 volts). You can also have a qualified electrician connect a generator directly to your house wiring according to local electrical codes, or find out from your local utility company about installing a power transfer switch.

DON'T try to power up your house by plugging the generator directly into a wall outlet, or "backfeeding." This dangerous practice not only endangers you by bypassing protection circuits in your own house, it also threatens neighbors connected to the same transformer, as well as utility workers who are working in the area.

DO prevent shock or electrocution by keeping the generator dry and out of the rain (erect a canopy over it if necessary).

DON'T use a portable generator indoors. They produce carbon monoxide (C0) which can quickly build up to poisonous levels in enclosed or partially enclosed areas. Symptoms include weakness, dizziness, sickness or nausea; if you experience any of these, get some fresh air immediately. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), at least 228 C0 poisoning deaths were caused by portable generators between 1990 and 2003.

DO place the generator far enough away from the house to prevent C0 from coming indoors, and just to be on the safe side, be sure to install C0 alarms (with battery backup) in your house when using a generator.

DON'T store fuel such as gasoline or kerosene in your house, or near a fuel-burning appliance like a water heater in an enclosed area like a garage.

DO let a generator cool down before refilling the fuel tank; spilled gasoline could ignite on a hot generator.

What to do until the lights come back on. Keep on hand:

- Batteries, flashlights, portable radios, one gallon of water per person per day, and a supply of non-refrigerated food that can be eaten without cooking.
- Standard, non-cordless telephone or cell phone.
- Cash and a full tank of gas – cash machines won't be working and neither will gas station pumps. Also:
- Never use candles for lighting; they can cause a fire.
- Turn off stoves, ovens, and other appliances to prevent heavy start up loads that could cause secondary blackouts when power is restored.
- Leave one light or radio on so you'll know when the blackout is over.
- Keep water and food on hand for your pets.
- Keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed to prevent food from spoiling.