

## Jackson County Department of Public Health

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### COUNTY AGENCIES WORK TOGETHER TO DISTRIBUTE FREE SMOKE ALARMS

Sometimes, you are in the right place at the right time and a perfect storm of good ideas just happens. That's exactly what brought about the great success of the Smoke Alarm Canvassing grant in Jackson County. Fire Marshal Michael Forbis and Fire Inspector Chris Moore were eating lunch at a restaurant in Cashiers, discussing the great opportunity they had discovered—the North Carolina Office of the State Fire Marshal were offering free smoke alarms to agencies willing to track, install, and provide fire safety education throughout the county. Both Forbis and Moore wanted to capitalize on this opportunity as there is a great need in Jackson County—74 structure fires were reported in Jackson County last year alone. According to Forbis, 21 of these fires caused damage to the structure while some were chimney fires or false alarms.

Two tables over, Sue Evans, Health Department Nurse and Safe Kids Jackson County Coordinator, and Ruby Lawrence, Health Department Interpreter and Safe Kids Jackson County member, were also enjoying lunch after a day of home visits in Cashiers. Forbis and Moore began telling Evans about this opportunity and asked her input on where to start. Lawrence, being connected with the Hispanic community in Jackson County, thought why not go about this grant similar to the way the Health Department goes about home visits?

"It just made sense to me," said Lawrence, "We see so many people on a daily basis during home visits who need smoke alarms. In fact, it is part of the process of a home visit. We ask 'Do you have a smoke alarm?' 'Do you have a carbon monoxide alarm?' So many people say no. With these resources, we could help people, families, especially kids—we could save lives."

From there, a team was formed. Forbis, Moore, and Lawrence began their outreach program with the backing of each of their agencies and Safe Kids Jackson County. Weekly, they canvass neighborhoods throughout Jackson County, knocking on doors, asking about their fire alarm status, sharing fire alarm safety information, and installing alarms when necessary.

"We couldn't have done this without Ruby," says Forbis, "She made all the difference. Not only can she interpret for us which is huge in many cases but she is familiar with many of the residents given the nature of her job. She helps us get in the door."

To date, the team has canvassed Jackson County for over a month, visiting 179 homes and installing 69 fire and/or carbon monoxide alarms. Some homes already have alarms—in this case, Forbis or Moore check to ensure the alarms are in working condition. If no one answers, the team leaves a door tag with contact information.

"We don't plan on stopping anytime soon," says Moore, "As long as we are installing alarms, the NC Office of the State Fire Marshal will send them. This project is humbling and is making a huge difference. And it is made possible because of the great collaboration between the Fire Marshal's Office, Code Enforcement, Health Department, and Safe Kids Jackson County."

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If you are interested in getting a fire alarm, please contact Michael Forbis at 828-586-7507 or Ruby Lawrence at 828-587-8227. The team will come to your home, install the alarm, and share fire alarm safety information at no cost.



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