

BUSINESS MONDAY

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ALLISON REDLICK, *Free Press*

Master Sweeper David Kehoe of Burlington examines the chimney of a South Prospect Street home in Burlington on Thursday. Kehoe is one of approximately 17 certified chimney sweeps in the state. Kehoe owns and operates The Artful Chimney Service.

It's time to sweep chimneys

Certified sweeps can be hard to find in fall

By Art Edelstein
Free Press Correspondent

F all's cool breezes are reminders to clean up the vegetable garden, cover frost-susceptible plants, stack the fire wood and call the chimney sweep.

Chimney sweeps are in great demand in autumn and hard to come by.

Compounding the problem is a potentially serious lack of trained technicians to do the job. Sweeps say people can wait as long as six weeks to have their chimneys cleaned.

While no one is predicting that the shortage will lead to a spate of dangerous chimneys

this year, the shortage of certified sweeps could affect safety in the future.

"We're not gaining any sweeps," said Lindley "Butch" Sutherland, an assistant fire marshal who oversees the Chimney Sweep Certification program at the Department of Labor and Industry in Springfield.

"I believe there is more work for the sweeps. If you retire from the business today, there is nobody to take your place," he said.

"Every chimney sweep I know is busy," Sutherland

See CHIMNEY, Page 4

2

Databank
Business news and upcoming events

9

Women build teams
Female professionals learn through networking

10

Careers
Local companies recognize employees

CHIMNEY: State has shortage of sweeps

Continued from Page 1D

said. "If you want your chimney cleaned in October, you better make an appointment in April."

There are 32 certified chimney sweeps in Vermont, according to the trade group Chimney Safety Institute of America. There also are approximately 20 to 30 uncertified chimney sweeps.

Chimney sweeping isn't for everyone.

"Nobody wants to work anymore today," says David Kehoe, a certified sweep at The Artful Chimney Service in Burlington. "Who wants to climb heights, get dirty, and have everybody look down at you because you are sooty and dirty? It's hard physical work."

Clark DeBona, at Chimney Works in Plainfield, said recruits to the profession are difficult to find.

"It's complex work; you can't be afraid of heights and must be fairly strong and agile and have communications skills; and the soot is carcinogenic," he said. "It's hard to find employees."

"We do hear a lot, not just from the sweeps, saying they cannot find good help, people who want to learn the trade and stay in it," said Robert Howe, chief fire prevention officer at the Department of Labor and Industry in Montpelier.

Kehoe has advertised in newspapers, but few people respond.

"It's a job nobody wants to do," he said.

On the job

Kehoe is surprised at the lack of interest because sweeping is a trade that can be learned on the job. The pay isn't bad, either.

Kehoe starts workers at \$11 an hour. They eventually can earn as much as \$15 an hour.

Sweeps can meet certification requirements by reading manuals and taking a certification test. It costs about \$1,200 to become certified, Kehoe said.

Robert Fish, a sweep from Londonderry and vice president of the Vermont Guild of Chimney Professionals, esti-

Information

■ Vermont Chimney Sweep Certification law has been in effect since January 1996. In 1998, 233 chimney fires were reported in Vermont (latest statistics available from Department Of Labor and Industry).

■ In 1998, there were 26,000 residential fires in the United States originating in chimneys, fireplaces and solid fuel appliances, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. The fires resulted in 480 personal injuries, 130 deaths and \$251.4 million in property damage.

■ Chimney Safety Institute of America:
www.csi-a.org

■ National Chimney Sweep Guild:
www.ncsg.org/

■ National Fire Protection Association:
www.nfpa.org/Home/index.asp

■ Wood Heat.Com:
www.woodheat.org/

mates chimney sweeping is a \$4 million to \$6 million service business in the state, though no exact figures exist on the size of the industry in Vermont.

The average certified sweep here grosses between \$150,000 and \$200,000 a year, he said.

DeBona said the popular image of a sweep belies the skill and knowledge sweeps need today.

The public clings to the image of the sweep presented in the popular movie "Mary Poppins," which "created the chimney sweep more as an entertainer than a technician," he said.

DeBona says modern sweeps have to do oil- and gas-burning appliances, understand the technology behind combustion, test for carbon monoxide and indoor air quality.

"It's a lot more than just cleaning a wood stove chimney," he said.

The sweeps say those skills earn them a good living.

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David Kehoe,
certified sweep

A chimney cleaning averages about \$75, and a liner installation about \$1,200, said Kehoe, who covers western Vermont from Addison County north. Those kinds of fees can earn the company owner \$40,000 to \$100,000 a year. A skilled employee can earn \$35,000 a year.

DeBona presents similar earnings figures.

"A chimney sweep owning his own business can net over \$50,000 a year and it can go up from there," he said. DeBona's two technicians earn \$16 an hour plus benefits.

More than wood stoves

Kehoe has more than 4,000 wood stove customers and estimates there are 15,000 wood stoves in the four counties he covers.

Other types of appliances also add to a sweep's workload. New fuel codes for new oil and gas stoves and heating systems are making these appliances more efficient, Kehoe said.

This efficiency causes more condensation in the chimney. This can lead to the destruction of older chimneys. The result has been a rush to install liners in older chimneys, and much more work for chimney sweeps.

"We're going crazy putting liners in," Kehoe said. "I do two a day every day."

DeBona said people are of-



Photos by ALISON REDLICK, Free Press

Master Sweeper David Kehoe stands on top of the chimney of a South Prospect Street home in Burlington on Thursday. Kehoe, one of 32 certified chimney sweeps in the state, owns and operates The Artful Chimney Service

ten surprised when they learn that the company that is delivering their oil or gas is not checking their chimney for safety.

"It's the economics," he said. "The more people become aware of their chimneys the more demand there will be. Often people aren't aware their chimneys have a problem."

The National Fire Protection Agency recommends all chimneys be inspected yearly regardless of fuel being burned, DeBona said.

Chimney fires are a common type of fire scenario in Vermont and account for around 250 fires a year, Howe said. However, these fires are not apt to be serious or cause large property loss.

"They are often contained, and fire departments can reach and stop them," he said. It is important that they be treated as a serious fire problem and the fire department called, he said.

The sweeps say they welcome more certified people to Vermont. "If we don't attract more chimney technicians, there could be a safety problem as soon as two years statewide the way the area's population is growing," Kehoe said.

"My two-year plan is to not take new customers," Kehoe said. "Currently, this time of year, I work 10-hour days six days a week. I don't know how long I can continue this pace."