

Standard Operating Procedure Level I Inspection Factory-Built Fireplace

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is promulgated by the Chimney Safety Institute of America (CSIA) solely as general guidance for chimney sweep professionals. Since all operations are different and since it is not possible to foresee all potential hazards, this SOP must be tailored to fit the needs of each particular operation. CSIA does not warrant in any way whatsoever that adhering to this SOP will reveal every possible defect in an appliance, fireplace, venting system or chimney. Accordingly, CSIA makes no guarantee, nor does it assume any responsibility, for any damage, claim, or legal action that may arise in connection with a chimney sweep professional's use of this SOP.

Introduction

NFPA 211 defines the inspection requirements for fireplaces and chimneys, and has defined three levels of inspection. A Level One inspection is the recommended level of inspection to use during routine chimney cleanings and annual inspections. Level One is the appropriate inspection when “nothing is changing”. In other words, the fireplace will continue to be used as it has been without significant change such as the addition of a new appliance. A Level One inspection should include readily accessible portions of the fireplace and chimney and accessible portions of connected appliances and the chimney connection. *Readily Accessible* can be described as being quickly or easily reached for inspection, maintenance or repair. Readily accessible would not require the use of tools for opening or removal of any panel, door or other covering. Readily accessible also does not require the use of ladders. *Accessible* could first require the movement or removal of a panel, door or other covering. *Accessible* could require the use of ladders or common hand tools such as a screwdriver or wrench. Neither Readily Accessible nor Accessible would require removal of permanently attached components or destructive actions to the building.

The NFPA 211 three levels of inspection are used as the standard in the chimney service industry but may not be the code in effect in your area. Your service truck should have a copy of NFPA 211 and the codes that are in use where you perform your service. Many fireplaces do not conform to the construction requirements of the 211. References made in this document are to information found in the NFPA 211 with the understanding that the specifics of your local code may vary. Where there are differences between NFPA 211 and your local adopted code with regard to chimney and fireplace construction, you should follow local code but may elect to recommend requirements from NFPA 211 if they are stricter.

Objective of a Level One Inspection

The Level I inspection is to be included with each sweep job. You must determine that the system is not blocked or significantly restricted and is capable of continued use as is. You are expected to determine the overall cleanliness of the venting system. This will require opening the damper and using a light to look up the chimney and into the flue. Sweep, or recommend sweeping, any chimney with 1/8th inch or greater buildup. This level of inspection applies to all readily accessible portions of the chimney exterior and

accessible portions of the appliance and chimney connection. You are expected to determine that no blockage exists in the flue, which you may be able to determine through visual inspection of the flue. In some cases, such as a flue with offsets, it might be necessary to send a chimney brush through the system or do an internal camera inspection.

If you plan to video scan the chimney set up the drop cloth and bring in the proper equipment. Take pictures of irregularities within the chimney and save them for future reference and comparison. Identify the photos with the date and location of the job. While the video scanning is not a mandatory part of a Level I inspection, some companies elect to provide the service in an effort to enhance the value of the inspection and to document their service.

Look at the Fireplace

Perform a visual inspection of the fireplace. Look for staining above the fireplace opening that would indicate that the fireplace has spilled smoke in the past. Also make note of damaged accessories such as burned out grates, screens or glass doors in poor condition. Look at the overall condition of the fireplace as well as the inner and outer hearth. If the fireplace has damaged refractory panels or sheet metal, make a note of that as well. Check to see if any air circulation grills or louvers on the fireplace have been blocked or restricted by fireplace accessories, mantels or trim.

Hearth Condition & Sizing

Confirm the dimensions of the outer hearth based on the manufacturers' installation instructions, if they are available onsite at the time of your inspection. If the manufacturer does not provide this information the hearth should be sized relative to the fireplace opening according to the NFPA 211. Look for cracks anywhere on the hearth with special emphasis between the outer hearth and the fireplace.

Combustibles surrounding the fireplace

Manufacturers' installation instructions will define whether combustible material can overlay the fireplace. It will also specify clearance requirements for the surrounding trim and mantle. Many factory-built fireplaces allow combustibles materials up to the side and top edges of the fireplace as long as the combustible material does not overlap the fireplace facing. These construction details vary from manufacturer to manufacturer.

Fireplace Installation

Note any gaps around the firebox opening where smoke could potentially move behind the finished wall. If you see any gaps either above or to the side of the fireplace, note it in your report.

Look in the Fireplace

Check the damper for closure. Does it move freely? Does it open enough to provide sufficient space for the smoke to flow freely through it? Does the area immediately above the damper appear to be fitted well? Many times a transition is required to mate

the chimney to the top of the fireplace. Note any broken, damaged, rusted or missing parts seen during your inspection.

Sweeping

If the chimney is so dirty you cannot complete the inspection you will have to sweep it before you can fully evaluate the condition of the flue and liner. Make a note of the volume or nature of the deposits found in the chimney. Whether sweeping from the bottom or the top, listen for odd sounds that could indicate a separation in the chimney or some unusual construction. If there are indications that there was a chimney fire, take pictures and document your findings before sweeping the flue and recommend a Level 2 inspection at this time. If the client declines the recommendation, make a note in your report. It may be useful to ask the homeowner to contact their insurance company and ask them if they prefer to have you sweep the chimney or if they would rather you leave the evidence undisturbed.

A Level One inspection does not require rooftop access but if you choose to sweep the chimney from the top you will be expected to look at the general condition of the system above the roof including chimney, cap, storm collar and flashing (or chase cover). Get an accurate measurement of the interior dimensions of the chimney. If there is a rain cap make sure it is an approved type and not obstructed or restrictive. Make note of missing, damaged, rusted or corroded parts of the system, to the extent they are readily accessible.

Caps, Top Dampers and Draft Systems

Just as it is important to determine that the flue is not blocked and restricted, it is likewise important to determine that any accessories installed at the top of the chimney are not blocked or restricted. This includes chimney caps, spark arrestors, top dampers and mechanical draft systems. Check these accessories to see if they are free from rust or corrosion and that movable parts are operable.

Delivering Your Report to the Client

After you have completed the inspection, you should discuss your findings with the client, provide them a copy of the report, and obtain their signature on the report. Without the client signature it is difficult to prove that you informed them of the conditions observed. You should maintain the inspection report in a permanent filing system.