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# PROTECTING FIRE SPRINKLER SYSTEMS FROM FREEZING IN CHAPTER FACILITIES



*Practical guidance for fraternity and sorority house corporations, property managers, and chapter leaders*

# Introduction / How to Use This Guide

Fire sprinkler systems are easy to overlook because they operate quietly in the background. During severe cold, however, a small issue, such as inadequate heat, an open window, cold air entering a concealed space, or an unmonitored equipment problem, can allow sprinkler piping to freeze.

That can create two serious problems at once: significant water damage when piping ruptures and a fire-protection system that may no longer be ready to perform as intended.

**This guide is designed for fraternity and sorority house corporation officers, property managers, and chapter leaders.** It is not a technical manual for servicing a sprinkler system. Rather, it will help you understand where freeze risks commonly develop, how to prepare the facility before winter and holiday breaks, how to recognize when conditions require attention, and when to involve a qualified fire-protection contractor.

**Use this guide in four parts:**

1. Prepare the facility and confirm responsibilities before winter and before an extended break.
2. Identify sprinkler-system areas that may be vulnerable to cold temperatures.
3. Monitor the facility and respond promptly during severe weather or a heating interruption.
4. Keep current emergency contacts for the fire-protection contractor, plumber, restoration company, alarm company, and insurance representative.

Technical work involving sprinkler valves, piping, drains, antifreeze, alarms, pumps, or system impairment should be handled only by qualified fire-protection professionals. The house corporation's role is to make sure the right people are engaged, the building remains protected, and concerns are addressed before they become a larger problem.

The following Winter Storm Elliott page illustrates why this attention matters.



## Lessons From Winter Storm Elliott

Winter Storm Elliott arrived just before Christmas in 2022, at a time when many chapter facilities were becoming quiet for the holiday break. Students had gone home, volunteers were with their families, and buildings that are normally full of activity were suddenly much less occupied.

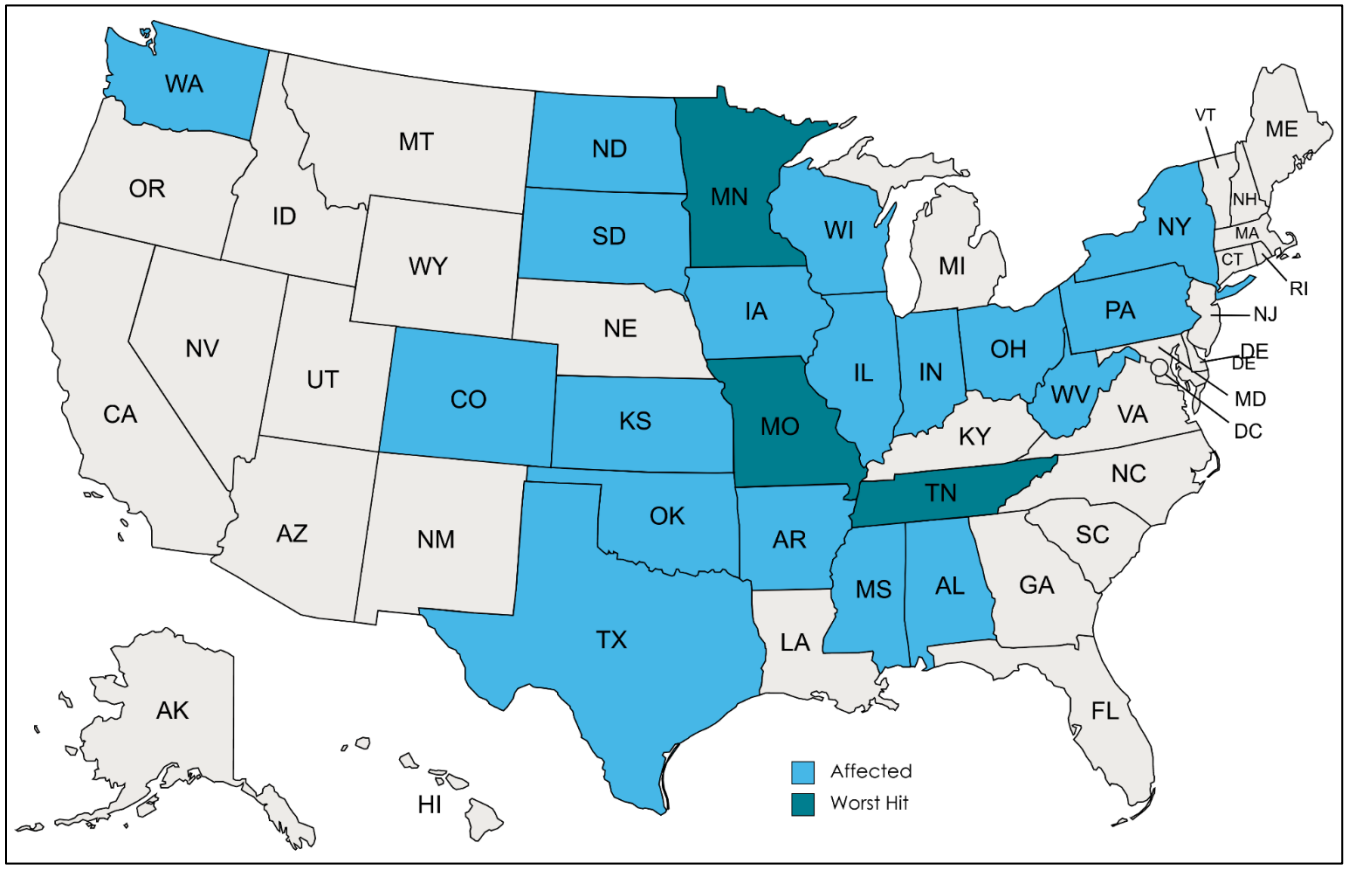
Then temperatures dropped quickly across much of the country. In some facilities, a small vulnerability rapidly became a much larger problem.

As the map below illustrates, the impact was widespread, but the lessons were clear. Many winter losses can be prevented or substantially reduced when someone has taken the time to prepare the facility, keep heat operating, identify vulnerable areas, and check the property while it is unattended.

This guide is intended to help house corporations and chapter leaders apply those lessons before severe weather arrives. A few thoughtful steps before a break, and regular attention while the facility is quiet, can protect the property, reduce disruption, and prevent a small concern from becoming a major loss.

### Worst Winter Storm in US Property Insurance History

***2nd Worst Property Loss in the 40+ Year History of the Fraternity Program***




**Dates of Loss:** ..... Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 2022

**39 claims** reported in **21 states** equaling **$3.7 million in total losses**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Worst Loss:** ..... **$1,090,089** | **Median Loss:** ..... **$75,661** |
| **Average Loss:** ..... **$131,856** | **Smallest Loss:** ..... **$14,303** |

## Why Fire Sprinkler Systems Need Separate Attention

Most water pipes in a facility create a problem only if they freeze and break. A fire sprinkler system is different. If sprinkler piping freezes and ruptures, it can release a large volume of water and may leave all or part of the facility without fully functioning fire protection until repairs are complete.

Sprinkler piping often runs through areas that are easy to overlook during a holiday break or severe-weather event: attics, roof spaces, stairwells, entry vestibules, utility rooms, exterior walls, storage areas, and concealed spaces. A facility may feel warm in occupied areas while a cold pocket develops near sprinkler piping elsewhere in the building.

### Know the Type of System You Have

Most chapter facilities with automatic sprinkler protection have one or both of the following systems:

- **Wet-pipe systems** always contain water in the sprinkler piping. They are especially vulnerable if any portion of the piping is exposed to freezing temperatures.
- **Dry-pipe systems** use pressurized air or nitrogen in the sprinkler piping and are commonly installed in areas exposed to cold. They still require regular inspection, testing, and drainage by a qualified fire-protection contractor.

Some facilities may also have antifreeze loops, fire pumps, standpipes, or other fire-protection equipment. house corporation officers and chapter leaders do not need to operate or service this equipment, but they should know what systems are present, where the primary equipment is located, and whom to call if a concern arises.



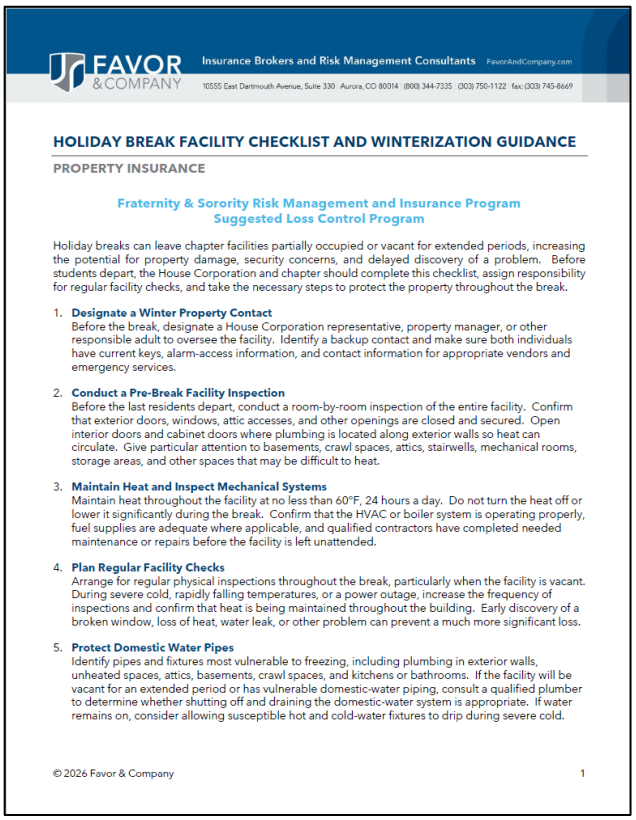
If the house corporation is unsure what type of system is installed or how it is protected, that is a good reason to call the fire-protection contractor before severe weather arrives.

# Responsibilities Before Winter and Before an Extended Break

A chapter facility is most vulnerable when it becomes less occupied during a holiday or semester break. Before students depart, the house corporation should confirm that responsibility for the facility has been assigned, heat will be maintained, essential systems are operating, and appropriate contractors can be reached if a problem develops.

Use the following **Holiday Break Facility Checklist and Winterization Guidance** as the primary pre-break planning tool. Complete it before the facility becomes less occupied, retain it with emergency contact information, and increase facility checks during severe weather.

Use the **Holiday Break Facility Checklist** to document responsibility for these items before the facility is left unattended.



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**HOLIDAY BREAK FACILITY CHECKLIST AND WINTERIZATION GUIDANCE**

PROPERTY INSURANCE

Fraternity & Sorority Risk Management and Insurance Program
Suggested Loss Control Program

Holiday breaks can leave chapter facilities partially occupied or vacant for extended periods, increasing the potential for property damage, security concerns, and delayed discovery of a problem. Before students depart, the House Corporation and chapter should complete this checklist, assign responsibility for regular facility checks, and take the necessary steps to protect the property throughout the break.

1. **Designate a Winter Property Contact**
   Before the break, designate a House Corporation representative, property manager, or other responsible adult to oversee the facility. Identify a backup contact and make sure both individuals have current keys, alarm-access information, and contact information for appropriate vendors and emergency services.
2. **Conduct a Pre-Break Facility Inspection**
   Before the last residents depart, conduct a room-by-room inspection of the entire facility. Confirm that exterior doors, windows, attic accesses, and other openings are closed and secured. Open interior doors and cabinet doors where plumbing is located along exterior walls so heat can circulate. Give particular attention to basements, crawl spaces, attics, stairwells, mechanical rooms, storage areas, and other spaces that may be difficult to heat.
3. **Maintain Heat and Inspect Mechanical Systems**
   Maintain heat throughout the facility at no less than 60°F, 24 hours a day. Do not turn the heat off or lower it significantly during the break. Confirm that the HVAC or boiler system is operating properly, fuel supplies are adequate where applicable, and qualified contractors have completed needed maintenance or repairs before the facility is left unattended.
4. **Plan Regular Facility Checks**
   Arrange for regular physical inspections throughout the break, particularly when the facility is vacant. During severe cold, rapidly falling temperatures, or a power outage, increase the frequency of inspections and confirm that heat is being maintained throughout the building. Early discovery of a broken window, loss of heat, water leak, or other problem can prevent a much more significant loss.
5. **Protect Domestic Water Pipes**
   Identify pipes and fixtures most vulnerable to freezing, including plumbing in exterior walls, unheated spaces, attics, basements, crawl spaces, and kitchens or bathrooms. If the facility will be vacant for an extended period or has vulnerable domestic-water piping, consult a qualified plumber to determine whether shutting off and draining the domestic-water system is appropriate. If water remains on, consider allowing susceptible hot and cold-water fixtures to drip during severe cold.

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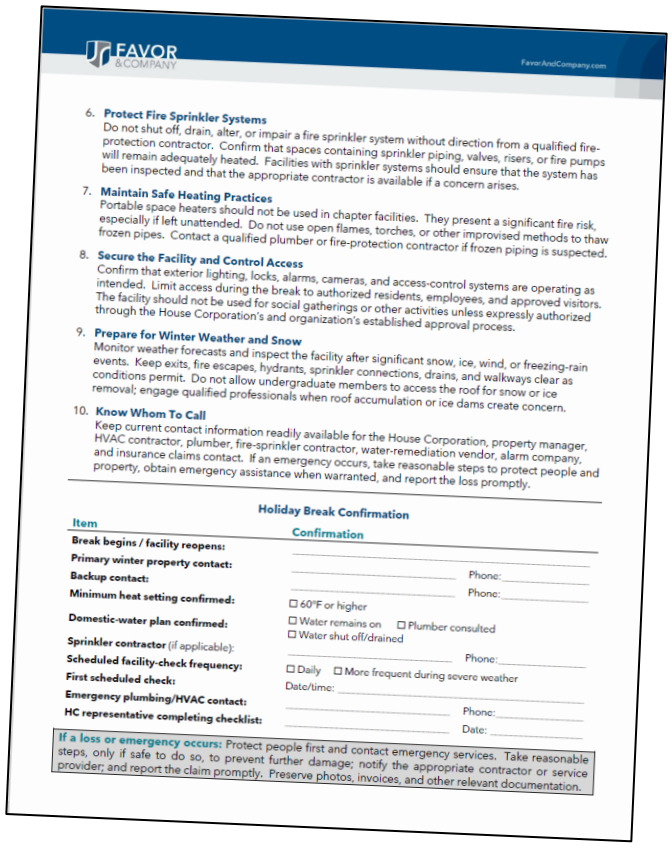

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6. **Protect Fire Sprinkler Systems**
   Do not shut off, drain, alter, or impair a fire sprinkler system without direction from a qualified fire-protection contractor. Confirm that spaces containing sprinkler piping, valves, risers, or fire pumps will remain adequately heated. Facilities with sprinkler systems should ensure that the system has been inspected and that the appropriate contractor is available if a concern arises.
7. **Maintain Safe Heating Practices**
   Portable space heaters should not be used in chapter facilities. They present a significant fire risk, especially if left unattended. Do not use open flames, torches, or other improvised methods to thaw frozen pipes. Contact a qualified plumber or fire-protection contractor if frozen piping is suspected.
8. **Secure the Facility and Control Access**
   Confirm that exterior lighting, locks, alarms, cameras, and access-control systems are operating as intended. Limit access during the break to authorized residents, employees, and approved visitors. The facility should not be used for social gatherings or other activities unless expressly authorized through the House Corporation's and organization's established approval process.
9. **Prepare for Winter Weather and Snow**
   Monitor weather forecasts and inspect the facility after significant snow, ice, wind, or freezing-rain events. Keep exits, fire escapes, hydrants, sprinkler connections, drains, and walkways clear as conditions permit. Do not allow undergraduate members to access the roof for snow or ice removal; engage qualified professionals when roof accumulation or ice dams create concern.
10. **Know Whom To Call**
    Keep current contact information readily available for the House Corporation, property manager, HVAC contractor, plumber, fire-sprinkler contractor, water-remediation vendor, alarm company, and insurance claims contact. If an emergency occurs, take reasonable steps to protect people and property, obtain emergency assistance when warranted, and report the loss promptly.

**Holiday Break Confirmation**

| Item | Confirmation |
|---|---|
| **Break begins / facility reopens:** | _____ |
| **Primary winter property contact:** | _____ Phone: _____ |
| **Backup contact:** | _____ Phone: _____ |
| **Minimum heat setting confirmed:** | ☐ 60°F or higher |
| **Domestic-water plan confirmed:** | ☐ Water remains on ☐ Plumber consulted ☐ Water shut off/drained |
| **Sprinkler contractor** (if applicable): | _____ Phone: _____ |
| **Scheduled facility-check frequency:** | ☐ Daily ☐ More frequent during severe weather |
| **First scheduled check:** | Date/time: _____ |
| **Emergency plumbing/HVAC contact:** | _____ Phone: _____ |
| **HC representative completing checklist:** | _____ Date: _____ |

**If a loss or emergency occurs:** Protect people first and contact emergency services. Take reasonable steps, only if safe to do so, to prevent further damage; notify the appropriate contractor or service provider; and report the claim promptly. Preserve photos, invoices, and other relevant documentation.

## Identify Vulnerable Locations and Review with Your Contractor

The house corporation does not need to diagnose sprinkler-system problems or understand every technical detail of the system. Its role is to make sure a qualified fire-protection contractor has identified the facility's cold-weather risks and that there is a clear plan to address them.

Use this section as the annual winter-preparation conversation with the contractor.

### Locations That Commonly Need Attention

Ask the contractor to identify any sprinkler piping or equipment located in:

- Attics, roof spaces, and areas above ceilings.
- Exterior walls and window areas.
- Stairwells, entry vestibules, and exit corridors.
- Utility rooms, storage rooms, and mechanical spaces.
- Crawl spaces, garages, loading areas, and service entrances.
- Areas near vents, air intakes, or other sources of cold air.

### Confirm These Items During the Annual Review

- *The type of sprinkler system protecting the facility and any areas that require special winter attention.*
- *Known freeze-prone locations, prior problems, and recommended repairs or improvements.*
- *Completion of required inspection, testing, maintenance, and seasonal service.*
- *The facility's alarm-monitoring arrangement and who receives trouble, supervisory, or water-flow notifications.*
- *The contractor's after-hours contact information and the process to follow if heat is lost, freezing is suspected, or the sprinkler system must be impaired.*

Document the contractor's recommendations, emergency contact information, and any follow-up work. Keep those materials with the facility's winter-preparation records.



## When Problems Arise

A heating interruption or suspected sprinkler-system freeze requires prompt attention. Do not wait for temperatures to improve or assume the issue will resolve on its own.

### If Heat Is Lost

1. Confirm that the heating problem is being addressed immediately by the HVAC contractor or property manager.
2. Visit the facility as soon as it is safe to do so, especially if the building is unoccupied or temperatures are below freezing.
3. Contact the qualified fire-protection contractor if the heat loss could affect sprinkler piping or equipment.
4. Increase building checks until heat has been restored and the contractor confirms that any affected sprinkler areas are protected.
5. Do not rely on portable space heaters as a substitute for restoring adequate building heat unless they are part of a plan approved and managed by qualified professionals.

### If Freezing Is Suspected

Warning signs may include frost or ice on piping, an unusually cold area, reduced building temperature, a sprinkler-system trouble signal, or unexplained moisture near sprinkler piping.

1. Contact the qualified fire-protection contractor promptly.
2. Do not use an open flame, torch, or other direct high-heat source to thaw sprinkler piping.
3. Do not drain, shut off, reset, or otherwise alter the sprinkler system unless directed by the fire-protection contractor or emergency responders.
4. Continue to monitor the area and keep people away from any location where piping appears frozen, damaged, or under stress.

### If Water Is Released From Sprinkler Piping

1. Call 911 if water is flowing from sprinkler piping, a fire alarm is activated, or there is any concern about fire or life safety.
2. Contact the fire-protection contractor immediately.
3. Keep occupants away from the affected area, particularly where water may contact electrical equipment or create slip hazards.
4. Do not attempt to operate sprinkler-system valves unless directed by emergency responders or the qualified fire-protection contractor.



5. Once the immediate situation is under control, contact the restoration company and insurance representative, document the conditions with photographs, and record the time and sequence of notifications.

A sprinkler-system impairment should be treated seriously. The immediate priority is protecting people and limiting further damage; restoration of the system should be coordinated by qualified fire-protection professionals.

# APPENDIX A – Winter Readiness Review

## *Property Manager & Fire-Protection Contractor Winter Readiness Review*

This appendix is intended for the property manager and qualified fire-protection contractor. It supports the house corporation's winter-preparation efforts but does not replace required inspections, testing, maintenance, or system-specific operating procedures.

All work involving sprinkler piping, valves, drains, air compressors, antifreeze, fire pumps, alarms, or system impairment should be completed or directed by qualified fire-protection professionals.

### 1. Before Cold Weather Arrives

Confirm that the facility has a designated person responsible for monitoring winter conditions, coordinating contractor response, and maintaining current emergency contacts.

Review the facility's fire-protection systems and identify:

- Wet-pipe, dry-pipe, antifreeze, standpipe, fire-pump, and other fire-protection systems.
- The location of risers, control valves, dry-system equipment, auxiliary drains, fire pumps, and related equipment rooms.
- Areas where sprinkler piping is located in attics, roof spaces, exterior walls, stairwells, vestibules, crawl spaces, garages, storage rooms, or other cold-prone locations.
- Prior freeze events, water damage, maintenance concerns, and unresolved recommendations.

Confirm that all required inspection, testing, maintenance, and seasonal service have been completed.

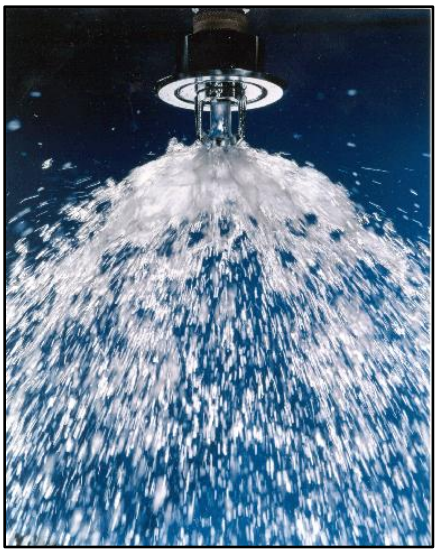
### 2. Building Heat and Cold-Air Protection

Confirm that the building heating system can maintain the facility at no less than **60°F** during occupancy reductions, holiday breaks, and severe weather.

Pay particular attention to areas that may be materially colder than the primary thermostat location. Review:

- Heating coverage in stairwells, vestibules, attic areas, mechanical rooms, storage areas, and spaces near exterior walls.
- Broken windows, missing weather-stripping, damaged doors, roof openings, exterior-wall penetrations, and other air leaks.
- Insulation in attics, soffits, eaves, crawl spaces, and other areas containing sprinkler piping.
- Temperature monitoring or alarms in hard-to-heat areas.
- HVAC or boiler maintenance status, fuel availability where applicable, and emergency service contacts.
- Power-loss monitoring and any backup-power arrangements serving building heat, alarms, or critical equipment.

## 3. Wet-Pipe Systems



For wet-pipe systems, confirm that all areas containing water-filled sprinkler piping will remain adequately heated and protected from cold air.

The fire-protection contractor should evaluate:

- Piping located near exterior walls, attics, unheated spaces, garages, or other cold-prone areas.
- The condition and suitability of insulation, air sealing, or other protective measures.
- Any antifreeze loops, including required testing and confirmation of the proper solution concentration.
- Prior repairs, leakage, corrosion, or other conditions that may increase freeze risk.

## 4. Dry-Pipe Systems

Dry-pipe systems are commonly used in areas exposed to cold temperatures, but they still require regular maintenance to prevent moisture from freezing in the piping.

The fire-protection contractor should confirm:

- The dry-pipe valve room is maintained at the required temperature.
- Low-point drains and auxiliary drains have been serviced as required.
- Piping is properly pitched to allow condensation to drain.
- The air compressor, air supply, gauges, and supervisory equipment are operating as intended.
- Air leaks, drainage concerns, or moisture accumulation have been identified and corrected.
- The system has been properly drained following required testing or maintenance.

## 5. Fire Pumps and Related Equipment

Where applicable, review fire pumps, pump rooms, water-storage tanks, hydrants, fire department connections, and related equipment.

Confirm that:

- Equipment rooms are maintained at the required temperature.
- Diesel-driven fire-pump rooms meet the manufacturer's and contractor's temperature requirements.
- Heating, fuel, ventilation, and power systems serving the fire pump are operational.
- Hydrants, fire department connections, sprinkler control valves, and other fire-protection access points can be reached and are kept clear of snow and ice.
- The contractor has identified any equipment requiring additional protection during extended freezing weather.

### 6. During Severe Cold

When sustained freezing temperatures, high winds, or severe winter weather are expected:

- Monitor forecasts and communicate conditions to the designated facility contact.
- Increase checks of temperatures in cold-prone areas and document concerns.
- Confirm that heating equipment, alarms, and monitoring systems remain operational.
- Inspect vulnerable areas for cold air, frost, ice, moisture, water, or damaged building-envelope conditions.
- Do not use open flames or improvised heat sources to thaw piping or equipment.
- Escalate suspected freezing, loss of heat, alarm notifications, or sprinkler-system concerns promptly to the qualified fire-protection contractor.

### 7. System Impairment and Emergency Response

Maintain a current written process for responding to a sprinkler-system impairment, heat loss, frozen piping, or water release. The process should identify:

- Who is authorized to contact the fire-protection contractor and emergency responders.
- The fire alarm, monitoring, HVAC, restoration, plumbing, and insurance contacts.
- Required notification and protection procedures if the sprinkler system must be impaired.
- How the facility will be monitored or protected until the system is restored.
- Documentation requirements for photographs, contractor reports, invoices, and repairs.

## A Final Reminder

Winter weather is unavoidable, but many sprinkler-system freeze problems are not. Maintaining a heated, secure, and regularly monitored facility, along with promptly seeking professional help when something is not right, can protect both the property and the fire-protection system.

**Best wishes to you and your family this holiday season.** ***Thank you for serving as a volunteer and for helping protect your chapter's home.***

# The Lowest One-Day Mean Temperature by Geographic Area in North America.

This map illustrates reinforces why sprinkler freeze protection must be matched to local winter conditions. Use it as a planning reference; a qualified fire-protection contractor should evaluate the facility's specific exposures, system design, and applicable requirements.

