

EXPERT ADVICE

Electrical work now simpler, safer

Former situation in contracting industry more frightening than most people realized

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Seventeen years ago this month, I stepped into the basement of the newly renovated home my wife and I were renting. That one, simple visit might have saved our lives.

I'd gone down to get supplies for our new baby boy when I heard a faint buzzing coming from the basement ceiling. It sounded like a fly, but different. As I followed the buzz to its source, my mouth went dry. The noise was coming from a new electrical box, installed as part of renovations the landlord had completed before we moved in.

I opened the cover and never slept soundly in that house again for the six months we were there. Wiring connections that supplied baseboard heaters were so poor that blue arcing was visible from the end of the twist-on connector. The air smelled of burned wires and the metal electrical box was warm, too. Isn't this exactly how electrical house fires start?

Problems like these are why Ontario electrical safety regulations have changed in ways that foster better workmanship, and I've got to say I'm glad. The old situation in the electrical contracting industry was more frightening than most people realized.

"Prior to the implementation of province-wide licensing by the Electrical Safety Authority in January 2007, there existed a fragmented licensing system administered only by certain municipalities," explains Peter Marcucci, the safety authority's vice-president for regulatory affairs.

"The provincial ECRA/ESA licence evens out the playing field for contractors," he says. "All are now required to be licensed regardless of the location in which they work; and only one licence is needed. This new system also makes it easier for consumers to trust licensed electrical contractors doing business anywhere in Ontario."

Before all this happened, a contractor had to be licensed in each municipality in which he worked – sometimes licensed, that is. Many municipalities had no electrical licensing requirement at all and that's the kind of thing that led to the near-tragic experience my family had in our rented house.

After I discovered the arcing electrical connections, a call to the landlord revealed he'd hired an ordinary handyman to do all the electrical work. This guy wasn't aware of his own limitations. During the remaining time we lived in the house, we found a handful of other dangerous electrical situations, too.

Few homeowners realized that it used to be legal for non-licensed tradespeople to complete electrical work under the old system. But now peace of mind is easier to find. Simply go to plugsafely.ca, click on the Licensed Electrical Contractor link, and type in the name of the electrical contractor you're considering to see if they check out as legit. You can also call 1-877-372-7233 for a verbal verification on any individual claiming to be a licensed electrician in Ontario. I've used both the phone service and website and they worked flawlessly.

Bona fide ECRA/ESA licensed electrical contractors must be at least 18 years old, be a master electrician or employ one, have an actual, physical business address in Ontario, hold at least \$2-million liability insurance, be registered with the Workplace Safety And Insurance Board and be current with all tax and licensing paperwork.

So, where does this leave the DIY homeowner? Are we still allowed to do our own electrical installations? As it stands, homeowners are permitted to complete electrical work in their own home, though it's not as easy as it looks. You really need to learn how to do this before you tackle even seemingly simple jobs.

"While homeowners are permitted to do wiring in their own premises, ESA does not recommend it," Marcucci warns. "Our research shows that few homeowners understand the risks involved with electricity and wiring. Just because the light turns on when the switch is flipped, doesn't mean you've wired it safely. It's quite possible the DIY wiring can endanger occupants or licensed electrical contractors working on the wiring system in the future."

While I'm always eager to rally against unnecessary government involvement (and there's plenty of it in Canada), this situation is different. ESA licensing of electrical contractors does exactly what the private sector has proven it cannot do: ensure that only competent people handle electrical work and that homeowners don't need to lie awake at night wondering what's happening in their electrical boxes.

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