

January 2, 2019

For Immediate Release

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Radon is Serious Health Hazard in South Central Nebraska

When the Reverend Ron Kuehner and his wife Elinor of Blue Hill decided to test their home for radon, they hoped that maybe, since they lived up on a hill, they might not need to be concerned about this colorless, odorless radioactive gas finding its way into their home.

The Kuehner’s purchased a do-it-yourself radon testing kit from the South Heartland District Health Department, followed the directions for where to place the test kit and how long to leave it out, and then sent the kit for processing. When the results came back, they were surprised to learn that the radon level in their home was 10 picocuries per liter (10 pCi/L).

“Since our radon level was 10 and the action level is 4 (pCi/L), we knew that our next step was to try to reduce the radon in our home,” Kuehner said. “We contacted a licensed mitigator to install a system that removes the radon gas.”

With the system in place, the Kuehners retested. “The radon level was at 2 when we retested,” he said. “We told our neighbors they should test, too!”

“Radon gas can be present in closed spaces, like basements. It enters buildings and homes from the soil beneath through cracks and holes in the foundation,” according to Jim Morgan, SHDHD’s public health risk coordinator and certified radon testing specialist. “Unless you test for radon in your home, there is no way to know how much radon exists in the air you are breathing.”

The American Cancer Society describes radon as “a colorless, odorless, radioactive gas.” Radon forms naturally from the decay (breaking down) of radioactive elements, such as uranium, in the ground.

Radon is a health risk in the health district, which includes Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties. According to Jessica Warner, health surveillance coordinator for SHDHD, approximately 65% of radon test results in the SHDHD service area in 2018-19 had radon levels above the EPA ‘action level’ of 4 picocuries/liter (pCi/L).

Warner said “the highest South Heartland result reported in 2019 was 25 picocuries/liter, but we’ve had radon testing results as high as 63 pCi/L reported from our counties.”

“The EPA estimates that radon causes about 21,000 lung cancer deaths each year in the United States,” said Dr. Michele Bever, Health Director at SHDHD. “We are encouraging residents to find out if they are at risk by testing their homes. There are some simple ways to fix most homes, if your radon levels are high,” she said.

In January, during Radon Action Month, SHDHD is promoting radon testing by distributing short-term test kits for \$7.00 each at 606 N. Minnesota in Hastings and from SHDHD satellite office sites, county UNL Extension offices in Clay, Nuckolls, and Webster Counties and the Superior Library.

“Make it your New Year’s resolution to protect your family by testing to see if you have radon in your home,” said Morgan.