



Who should be lighting gas pilot lights?

These days many utility companies and departments are operating with reduced budgets and downsized staffs. However, even during challenging times, safety remains a critical and paramount concern; especially when dealing with natural gas. One particular issue that has recently surfaced is if the correct employees are being sent into customers' homes when gas pilot lights require lighting or relighting. On its face, this task may seem fairly simple – something any gas department field employee can perform. However, not only does this service need to be performed correctly and safely to protect both the employee and customer, there are serious liability and legal concerns associated with sending uncertified employees into homes.

The first problem arises when a customer assumes any uniformed gas department employee sent to the home is certified and trained to perform a specific job. Of course, there are a myriad of home-based jobs and repairs the gas department could be asked to address; therefore, certifications and training will vary accordingly. First and foremost, however, let us address lighting a pilot light.

Many people may be familiar with the “OQ” certification, which is common to the natural gas industry and employees. The term stands for “Operator Qualification” Certification and is for specific operational and maintenance tasks performed on the pipeline that are federally regulated by the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA). To be more specific, OQ certified employees are required to perform specific operational and maintenance tasks on the natural gas pipelines as well as gas service pipelines up to the customer’s meter or change-of-custody point. In the context of this discussion, it is important to note that you are NOT required to be OQ certified to perform this task of lighting gas pilots. To reiterate this point, on the customer’s side of the meter, or change-of-custody point, gas department employees are not required to be OQ certified.

So what credentials are required to light the gas pilot light?

Under Alabama State Law, gas department employees must be either a current certified Master Gas Fitter, a Journeyman Gas Fitter or certified through an equivalent, approved Certified Program to perform the necessary safety checks as part of the procedure to light a gas pilot light safely in a customer’s home. This certification is administered by the State of Alabama Plumbers and Gas Fitters Examining Board. Information on obtaining these certifications and the laws that apply are posted on their website at <http://pgfb.state.al.us/>.

Remember that a customer assumes a gas department employee is correctly trained to do the job. Not only could the life of the employee and customer be at risk, sending an uncertified employee creates a massive liability exposure for your entity. So, while you may be tempted to send any employee to perform the seemingly simple task of lighting a pilot light, please – for everyone’s sake – make sure the employee is appropriately certified.

Richard Buttenshaw, Loss Control Representative

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