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Urgent News for Property Owners: Earthquake Inspections

Damage from earthquakes can be found hundreds of miles from epicenter and weeks after quake, local expert urges property owners to inspect property for signs of damage using FEMA guidelines.

/24-7PressRelease/ - INDIANAPOLIS, IN, May 09, 2008 - Some Indiana residents were jostled awake almost two weeks ago to rattling beds, falling knick-knacks and pets gone wild - while others slept through a neighboring state's earthquake.

But residents located more than 170 miles from the 5.2-magnitude epicenter in Indianapolis, or other nearby locations, could find themselves more heavily impacted by the earthquake than what they had originally thought - and signs of that impact could be appearing now.

Since the April 18 earthquake, almost 30 aftershocks have emanated from the West Salem, Ill. Area. The latest aftershock - just a little over a week ago - registered a 3.7 magnitude tremor and geologists are predicting the mild aftershocks will continue. What homeowners and residents might not have taken into consideration is how the earth's rolling and pitching movements during the earthquake and subsequent aftershocks can affect buildings and structures located hundreds of miles from the quake's epicenter.

Gary Chambers, a civil engineer for Wolf Technical Services, Inc., said the biggest threat from an earthquake hundreds of miles away is the subtle damage which, if left unrepaired, can lead to more serious problems.

"It doesn't take much of a crack to get water into your house and it's not something you might notice immediately," Chambers said.

With more than 30 years in construction and engineering design, Chambers knows how a crack can allow "bad stuff" to happen. He said homeowners living closer to the epicenter will have more noticeable damage, but if a homeowner felt the quake, so did the structure and making sure there isn't damage is a good idea.

"Those cracks can lead to water damage, and with it mold which could be more of a prevalent problem in this area," he said. "You need three things for mold to occur. You need moisture. You need the right temperature, and you need something for mold to feed on. Mold is everywhere, but if it is missing an element it won't grow. However, if you get cracks in your roof flashing or walls and that allows water in where you didn't have any before, it can provide the missing link that mold needs to grow."

According to FEMA, walls can separate and cracks can begin to form for several weeks after an earthquake.

FEMA has provided a detailed list to check for damage after an earthquake to make sure a building has not been structurally compromised. Chambers recommends homeowners check the following FEMA warning signs for earthquake damage:

- Has the house shifted on its foundation? Has it fallen away from the foundation in any place?
- Is the structure noticeably leaning? When looking at the house from a distance, does it look tilted?
- Do you see severe cracks or openings between the structure and outdoor steps or porches?
- Do you experience seriously increased vibrations from passing trucks and buses?
- Do you see severe cracks in external walls?
- Are the power lines to your home noticeably sagging?
- Is your hot water heater leaning or titled?
- Are all the water connections secure and dry? (Pipes, toilets and faucets?)
- Are doors and windows more difficult to open?
- Is the roof leaking since the earthquake? Look for water damage to the ceiling.
- Has the furnace shifted in any way? Are ducts and exhaust pipes connected and undamaged?
- Do you experience unexplained draftiness? Cracks in the walls, poorly aligned window frames, and loosened exterior siding

can all let in breezes.

- Has the floor separated from walls or stairwells anywhere inside the house?
- Are there cracks between such built-in fixtures as lights, cupboards or bookcases?

Another area that can pose unseen dangers after a mild earthquake is the chimney. Chambers said that if there is a crack in the firebox of the chimney or the chimney liner the hot gas can escape into the framing of the house and cause the house to catch on fire.

"We see that every once in awhile, not from earthquakes necessarily, but from poor construction and other things," he said.

Chambers recommends homeowners have a qualified chimney sweep inspect the interior of a chimney if they suspect there is a problem.

The following is FEMA's checklist for chimneys:

- Are there cracks between the chimney and the exterior wall or the roof?
- Are there cracks in the flue liner?
- Do you find unexplained debris in the fireplace?

Chambers said most of the homes in the Indianapolis area should be in good condition after the earthquake because it was not a large earthquake that occurred within a few miles of the city. He said recent changes to the Indiana Building codes to improve the standards for earthquake construction have also made new construction safer.

If cracks are discovered, Chambers offered two options for homeowners. The first is to keep an eye on the crack for a short period of time and measure it to determine if it is growing. The second option applies if the crack is small enough and doesn't impact the structure of the building. He said then homeowners should caulk or repair the crack to make sure water does not leak into the building.

Chambers stressed homeowners should always get at least two different opinions and estimates for repairs and not to pay for any work until the work is finished to prevent being scammed if more detailed repairs are needed.

"Get references for contractors including satisfied friends and neighbors or even Angie's List," Chambers said.

Chambers is one of several experts at Wolf who specialize in various areas of the construction industry including investigations of property losses, evaluations and consultations, building code and standards compliance, civil engineering and building failure analysis.

Wolf Technical Services, Inc., has been a leader in forensic engineering and research for more than 30 years. Based in Indianapolis, our team of professional experts specializes in accident reconstruction, fire investigations, government research, product liability, construction, transportation and logistic consulting, trucking safety, shipping loss prevention and graphics.

For more information about Wolf or to schedule an interview with Mr. Chambers, please visit us on the Internet at www.wolftechnical.com or contact Joe Ward at (800) 783-9653.