SAFETY SENSE

Don't Put Yourself In Harm's Way At The Fuel Pump

(NAPSA)—There's an invisible force that could put you in danger at the fuel pump. It's static electricity, and it could ignite a potentially fatal fire if you're not careful when refueling your vehicle or filling a portable fuel container.

"Gasoline fumes are volatile. Static electricity can create a spark that could cause a fire if it's near gas fumes," said Philadelphia Fire Department Commissioner Harold Hairston. "It's vital to fill fuel containers safely to protect yourself, your family and your property. Even many safety conscious people may not be aware of the proper way to fill a portable fuel container."

Most consumers are aware of static electricity—common examples are the shock felt when dragging your feet across a carpet or the electrical charge seen and felt when removing laundry from the clothes dryer.

This phenomenon is caused by the friction between two dissimilar types of matter carrying opposite electrical charges. Although these examples are harmless, the presence of static electricity at the fuel pump can, given certain unsafe practices, have tragic results.

"Every time you pump gasoline, a charge of electricity builds up on the gasoline as it flows through a pipe or hose, and this charge takes several seconds to several minutes to dissipate after the gasoline has reached the fuel tank or container," said Bob Renkes, executive director of the

Petroleum Equipment Institute.

In most cases, this situation is not hazardous because the gasoline dispenser and the vehicle are grounded, meaning there is a direct path through which the electricity can be discharged to the ground.

When this electricity is not grounded—such as when a portable fuel container is in the trunk or truck bed while being filled—static electricity can cause a spark that could ignite fuel vapors.

"For safety, you need to place the (fuel) container on the ground and fill it on the ground," Renkes said. "Placing the container on the ground makes it easier for the electrical charge to escape."

Static electricity also can build up when gasoline is flowing into the fuel container; consumers can enhance the grounding process by keeping the pump nozzle in contact with the fuel container during the filling process. This contact sets up a grounding connection between the pump and the container.

Here are some basic safe-fueling steps, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the American Petroleum Institute and other safety and fuel experts:

• Always place portable fuel containers on the ground and out of contact with the vehicle when refueling—this helps ground the container. Do not fill the container while it is in the trunk or truck bed.

• Only use portable containers that are approved for the type of fuel you are pouring.

• Keep the pump nozzle in contact with the container throughout the fueling process to establish and maintain grounding.

• Do not use an automatic pump-handle device—fill the container manually and slowly. This helps decrease the chance of static electricity build-up as well as spilling or splattering.

• Keep your hand on the fuel nozzle throughout the refueling process, and never re-enter the vehicle while fuel is still being pumped into the tank.

• Don't smoke when refueling a vehicle or filling a portable fuel container.

Unsafe practices at the fuel pump can and do have tragic consequences. Remember that you are dealing with highly volatile vapors that can, given a spark from static electricity, ignite with powerful force. Help protect yourself and your passengers by focusing on safe fueling procedures.