

Providing Fire Protection for More Than a Century

By Patrick Lapinski

Translating common sense approaches into practical fire prevention systems for businesses across the Northland is best left to the professionals. The design, installation and monitoring teams at the Viking Automatic Sprinkler Company have been providing peace of mind for more than a century.

The Viking Automatic Sprinkler Company was founded in 1924 in St. Paul, says Scott Kishel, area manager for the Duluth office. Nationally, the company has 24 branch offices, three located in Minnesota. Kishel says it's a massive, but not very well-known industry.

In the Duluth office, Viking's services are broken down into three main categories – water-based sprinkler systems, special hazard systems and their most recent addition, fire extinguishers.

Taking a deeper dive, Viking Automatic Sprinkler offers nearly a dozen different fire suppression systems, in addition to monitoring, detection and alarm control systems. Viking's in-house engineers begin each project with the design and engineering required to meet customer needs and expectations, followed by the system installation done by



certified pipefitting professionals.

Once a system is in place, Viking performs regular inspection, testing and maintenance. "We don't just install these things and forget about them. By law and per code, they should be inspected and tested at the minimum annually," says Kishel.

Viking's industrial base of customers includes many familiar names in the community, like U.S. Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs along the mining rich Iron Range; wood and paper industry giants Potlatch, Sappi Fine Paper in Cloquet, Louisiana Pacific in Two Harbors.

A third customer sector Viking services is the power utility industry. "We do a lot with Minnesota Power's service centers and power plants, so those are the big three sectors we hang out in who use these different types of applications."

Beyond the heavy industry, Viking Sprinkler has a solid base of general contractor customers for projects, "like the recently completed Essentia Hospital in downtown Duluth," says Kishel.

Kishel, who grew up on the Range in Virginia and played collegiate hockey at UMD, started with Viking in 2018. "There's a lot more that goes into this than just 'stabbing heads' and running water to it that

kept me interested in it," he said. "I appreciate what Viking and our parent company API Group offers with our leadership training opportunities. It's very flexible. API's enduring purpose is building great leaders."

Kishel believes he was fortunate to find this pathway into the business through what he describes as a leap of faith. "I really enjoy the variety of problems that we get, different sites that we work at with great team members. It gets me up every day. You just never know who's going to call and who's got a problem in our pursuit to be the best fire protection company in northern Minnesota."

A HIDDEN NICHE

The Duluth regional office of Viking Sprinkler is located over the hill, in Hermantown, where Wendy Wojtysiak is Viking's Operations Lead. Wojtysiak maintains the day-to-day operations and makes sure all the moving parts, the 20-some field technicians, sales reps and internal teams stay focused on a daily basis.

When Wojtysiak started with Viking the firm's core business was sprinkler systems. The acquisition of the Electric Scientific Company in 2022 added the special hazard fire and alarm portion of their business to Viking's offerings. The expansion



Scott Kishel, area manager for the Duluth office



more than doubled the number of office and field personnel to nearly 30 team members.

"We're really having a lot of fun," says Wojtysiak about the growth and acquisition. "Fire protection is an area most people never consider when looking at new construction; it's sort of a hidden niche. The new part of the business brings new opportunities, along with new people."

In their Duluth office Viking employs two design engineers whose duties are evenly divided between the special hazards team and the sprinkler side. Likewise, the office team also has two inspection coordinators, two service managers and two business development and sales agents, again, one for each side, sprinkler and special hazard.

The service managers work directly with the field technicians, taking care of their needs, from proper protective equipment and tools to making sure they have what they need on the trucks. "I don't think their phones ever get turned off; they're pretty much always available for the field teams and our customers."

While inspections happen on a scheduled basis, servicing a system can happen at any time, depending on if something goes wrong, explains Wojtysiak. "Think about a hotel room with the horror stories where people will hang things off of sprinkler heads, and then all of a sudden the sprinkler head goes off and there's a service call because someone's not



thinking that a sprinkler head is fragile and delicate."

Wojtysiak joined the team in 2018. Her diligence in streamlining business processes and updating the office's software systems soon earned her a promotion to Service Manager at Viking Automatic Sprinkler. Her influence and service in the larger Duluth community garnered Wojtysiak the first annual Minnesota Finance & Commerce Unsung Hero award, presented by recognizing the non-traditional roles played by women in the construction industry in 2023.

CUSTOMER FOCUSED

Viking personnel are licensed to provide drawings and calculations and their special hazard technicians are NICET (National Institute Certification for Engineering Technologies) certified. On the sprinkler side, the installation team are members of the Local 669 Sprinkler Fitters union, licensed for Minnesota or Wisconsin to be able to install, test and maintain sprinkler systems.

"We're always looking for new customers," says Kishel, "customers that align with our values. We're proud that we can respond with a lot of service offerings and quick response time."


"I take a little bit of a different approach," Kishel continues. "I know flat out, we're not going to be the cheapest. For folks who partner with us, they're going to get accurate



timelines and we're going to get the job done when it needs to get done, with a high level of integrity and professionalism behind it. When folks have an issue with their alarm system, their sprinkler system, when you call Viking, you're going to get a call back pretty fast. I take a lot of pride in making sure we're on top of it."

BUILDING GREAT LEADERS

In 1985, Viking was acquired by the Minnesota-based API Group, Inc., a "global, market-leading business services provider of fire and life safety, security, elevator and escalator and specialty services." Globally, API has an estimated 260,000 employees. In addition to Viking, in the Duluth area API owns and operates Jamar Construction, United Piping, specialty contractors Tenet Solutions, and LeJeune Steel Company, a structural steel fabricator.

API Group operates with the stated purpose and goal of "Building Great Leaders," says Kishel. "It's not just a bank of engineers that sit here. It's not just pipe fitters. There are a lot of other nuances to the business, from sales or marketing to data analytics. There is a lot of opportunity through leader labs and leadership courses with chance to network, collaborate and just meet other folks in the business that you don't even normally get to cross paths with." 

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