

Building Fire/Evacuation Drills

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to prepare for a safe building evacuation during an emergency. For decades our schools have practiced fire drills several times per year, but the same cannot be said for most office or other non-school buildings. Many large cities, especially those with high-rise office buildings, have regulations requiring mandatory evacuation drills, but there are few if any such requirements outside of those large cities. Besides the threat of fire, other common reasons for a building evacuation are bomb threats and other threats of violent or hostile acts.

Education

Many employees will enter and leave the building through the same exit route, day in and day out. That route may not be the quickest or even available during an emergency - especially if it involves an elevator. They may not even be aware of other stairways or emergency exits. Fire or evacuation drills offer the opportunity for employees to locate and use alternative routes under non-life threatening circumstances. The drills might also indicate problems with the building's existing means of egress.

Another aspect of education is Occupant Responsibilities during a drill. They include:

- Accounting for all co-workers while leaving the work area
- Closing any open windows and interior doors to prevent the spread of flames
- Checking restrooms to be sure that they are unoccupied
- No use of the elevator, if the building is so equipped
- Having a predetermined relocation place after exiting the building
- A final head count to ensure all employees evacuated safely

Management should discuss these items with employees well before the start of any ongoing program of live evacuation drills.

Process

In Multi-tenant Occupancies: The building manager should coordinate with each of the tenants, advising them of the plans for drills, and providing information such as evacuation routes from where each tenant is located in the building, as well as alternative routes in case an exit is unable to be used. Evacuation diagrams should be created and posted throughout the building, as well as information on how to report a fire or other problems requiring emergency evacuation. Ideally, these diagrams should be located in each tenancy, as well as near fire alarm pull stations.

In a Single Tenant Occupancy: Although easier than having to coordinate with a variety of different occupants, the single occupancy may have different divisions within the same building, such as offices in one area, fabrication in another, and shipping & receiving in a third section, and even a warehouse area. Each of these divisions may require their own evacuation routes. Once determined, those primary and alternate evacuation routes should be posted as described above.

Planning Drills

Prior to the start of any live drills, the building manager should first develop several different scenarios to be used on successive drills. The first could be a normal evacuation following the standard route. Others could use staff members holding signs stating “Exit blocked, take alternate route”, at various points where an alternate is available. The point is to raise the occupants' awareness of the different routes from the building.

Live Fire Drills & Evacuations

Within a month of the initial informational meetings a live fire drill should be conducted in cooperation with the local fire department. This involves pre-drill notification of the fire department and alarm company, activation of an alarm, and building evacuation. All employees must participate in the drill. Employees should leave quickly, in an orderly manner, and gather at the relocation place safely away from the building. Once there, attendance should be taken. Any employee known to have been in the building at the time of the drill, but not present, should be listed as a missing person. That list should be given to the building manager. For initial training purposes drills should be held every two weeks for a short period of time. Each drill should be slightly different to simulate realistic fire situations. After that, drills should be conducted every three to four months. Holding drills more frequently could cause the occupants to become complacent choose not to participate. A log should be kept of each drill; listing the date, general conditions under which the drill was conducted, a list of who did not participate, problems uncovered during the drill, and how any problems were resolved.

Life Safety Code

For detailed national standards, refer to the National Fire Protection Association's publication NFPA 101, on their website at: www.nfpa.org

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