

LIFE SAFETY – EMERGENCY EXITS

How would one of your residents or a member of the general public escape from your premises in an emergency? Would they know where all the exits are in case the first choice is too crowded or unusable? Are you sure the emergency exit doors will be unlocked and that the “means of egress” such as hallways, stair towers, and doorways will be unblocked? Knowing the answers to these questions could save lives in an emergency. Every year, thousands of people are injured and even killed because basic emergency exit precautions are not followed.

The Problem

The most common problems that result in injuries and deaths involve hallways and other exit pathways that are blocked or used for storage and exit doors that are locked for building security reasons.

Building design can also play a part in providing protection for the public and providing a safe and adequate means of exiting a building in an emergency. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) - #101-Life Safety Code, and other local and state jurisdictional codes provide the minimum exit requirements for buildings based on their occupancy type. New building construction, as well as building renovations, is required to comply with applicable standards and pass jurisdictional inspections before a Certificate of Occupancy is issued and the building occupied.

Building owners who make interior changes to their properties without the involvement of the proper authorities can put themselves and others at serious risk if these changes affect the building’s exit design in any way.

The Solution

- Determine the wishes of your local fire marshal when it comes to building evacuation. Because of structural features, some fire marshals advocate residents staying in their living units in the event of an emergency.
- Always follow all local and state jurisdictional codes for any new construction or renovations to existing properties. Know the requirements for your category of building. The Life Safety Code has 16 categories of occupancy, each with different requirements for new and existing structures. Your local fire marshal or PMA consultant can help you identify where your structure is classified. All exits should be maintained throughout the course of any construction activities.
- Keep all exit routes (including stair towers) free of flammable or combustible materials, furnishings, or holiday/event decorations, at all times.
- Do not use exit hallways or other exit travel pathways as a storage area.

- All exit doors **MUST** be kept unlocked from the inside while the building is in use and occupied. If security is an issue, special panic hardware, security alarms, and other devices should be used to provide the level of security required while still allowing unobstructed exiting.
- Adequate emergency lighting must be provided for all exit pathways and exit doors.
- All exits must be marked with a standard “**Exit**” sign and be properly illuminated at all times. Exit signs should never be covered for any reason for any period of time.
- Any doors along an exit pathway that do not provide access to an exit to the outside, such as closets or storage rooms, must be marked “**Not an Exit.**”
- Provide an emergency alarm system to alert the public that emergency evacuation of the building is required.
- All emergency exit doors from any interior building rooms or areas ***must*** swing outward towards the direction of travel to exit the building.
- Exterior building areas that provide an exit pathway to a safe outside area must be kept clear of any storage. All exterior stairs or walkways must be kept in good repair in all weather conditions.
- A periodic and documented inspection program for every property should be implemented. It should include a survey of all building access points and emergency exits that ensures they are clear and accessible at all times.
- Schedule periodic emergency drills with tenants to acquaint them with alarms, exit procedures, and meeting places. Involve tenant committees in the effort and make sure that there are no surprises.

Conclusion

It is every Housing Authority’s responsibility to comply with local, state, and federal codes as they relate to public safety. Serious injury or even death can result when adequate exit facilities are not maintained and an emergency arises that requires evacuation from public spaces.

For further assistance on this matter or other safety and risk control issues, contact your risk management consultant or Jim Rhoads, NJPHA-JIF safety consultant (610-397-5061).

References: National Fire Protection Association Code #101 – “Life Safety Code”

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