

## SEATTLE FIRE DEPARTMENT

# Information Bulletin #963



## High Rise Building Emergency Evacuation Drills

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### Requirements

Emergency evacuation drills are required annually in high rise buildings, as specified in Section 405 and 9309.3 of the Seattle Fire Code. The drills should be conducted in accordance with procedures set forth in the building's Emergency Operations Plan. As long as all occupants of the building experience an emergency evacuation drill annually, the conducting of drills on selected floors in the building can occur on a staggered schedule.

All building staff and occupants should participate in drills. Even though apartment residents are exempt from participating, they should be encouraged to do so.

Records should be kept to document emergency evacuation drills. The record should indicate the following:

1. Name & title of the person conducting the drill.
2. Date & time of the drill.
3. How occupants were notified of the drill (ie alarm activated, voice alarm, etc.).
4. List of staff members participating.
5. Number of occupants evacuated.
6. Any special conditions simulated (i.e. "fire" blocking a stairwell).
7. Problems encountered during the drill.
8. Time required to accomplish a complete evacuation.

### Conducting a Drill

In a fire drill, building occupants should duplicate as closely as possible the actions they would take if a fire occurred. Total evacuation of a high rise building is not practical, and

could even be dangerous. Drills involving selected portions of the building more accurately simulate the likely conditions during a fire emergency.

Drills are best initiated by activation of the fire alarm system by experienced building staff. Immediately prior to the drill, notify the building's central station monitoring company, to prevent a Fire Department response to the building. When the drill is completed notify the monitoring company that the building is returned to normal operations.

During a drill, tenants should be encouraged to follow the established fire emergency procedures. Keep in mind that during an emergency, people tend to perform those behaviors that they have practiced. Minimum participation requires building occupants to enter the exit stairwell, although it is advisable to have them go to their actual staging area, if possible. Those evacuating to the outside of the building should report to the established assembly area away from the building.

### Announced Vs. Unannounced

Emergency evacuation drills may be pre-announced to building staff or occupants, or they may be unannounced. Consideration of the building occupants and the use of the building may determine which type of drill is most appropriate. For example, in a residential building primarily occupied by older adults or a mixed-use facility where doctor's offices may be located, it may be best to notify tenants of the date and time of the drill.

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## Critique the Drill

Drills are more than training. In a drill, building staff and floor wardens should follow procedures set forth in the building's Emergency Operations Plan. After each drill evaluate the fire and life safety systems, staff performance, tenant participation and make changes as necessary to improve future drills. Ask for input from building staff and tenants regarding the evacuation process and drill coordination.

### Suggested evaluation topics:

- Could building occupants clearly hear and understand the alarm and any additional instructions?
- Was the evacuation completed in an orderly and expedient manner?
- Did floor wardens guide occupants to safety, complete floor checks and report to building staff or the Fire Safety Director upon completion of the evacuation?
- Were disabled persons assisted in their response procedures?
- Were elevators avoided by occupants during evacuation?

## Establishing a Fire Scenario

While evacuation of a high rise building may be completed in a matter of minutes in a fire drill, the situation is often quite different under actual conditions. Evacuation may be slowed by poor visibility from smoke, lighting failure, or because one or more of the exit stairwells is blocked by smoke or fire.

To prepare building occupants for more realistic conditions, you may choose to designate a specific location for the "fire" and establish a scenario which would alter the basic evacuation drills procedures. It is best to attempt this type of drill after occupants have become familiar with their standard evacuation procedures. This type of drill may be more interesting to building occupants, as they have to make decisions when they encounter situations apart from the ordinary.

### Ideas for creating a fire scenario:

- Post signs or locate building staff inside one of the exit stairwells to inform those attempting to enter that the stairwell is blocked by smoke or flame and they must choose a different route.
- Designate individuals to wear signs indicating impaired sight, hearing or mobility which may require assistance from building occupants in an emergency. In hotel occupancies, persons may be designated as non-English speaking and may require special instructions.
- Use a cardboard box decorated with red paper flames, or a flashing light, to indicate where the "fire" is located.

## Apathy or Lack of Participation

There are some building occupants who continually refuse to participate in evacuation drills. Problems with frequent false or nuisance alarms in a building may make matters even worse. In most instances, the Fire Department cannot issue citations for failure to participate in a drill.

The Fire Safety Director's best tactic in gaining cooperation in drills is to try to explain the advantages of participation. Explaining that under real fire conditions evacuation can be considerably more complicated is one method. Informing employers that liability for their employees may increase if they do not allow or encourage participation in the drill may be influential. If a fire did occur and one of their employees was injured or killed, it is possible they could be named in some legal action because of their lack of support for learning fire safety procedures.

Making the drill more interesting by using a fire scenario, or checking to make sure the drill will be held at a convenient time, may yield better participation. Creative tactics can be tried. One employer in Seattle tries to make the drill a positive activity for those participating by having floor wardens hand out candy to occupants as they reach their assembly area. The occupants find the candy a pleasant surprise and it gives them something to talk about besides any inconvenience resulting from the interruption caused by the drill.