

# Evacuating a High Rise Building

By Alan Achatz, CCM, CHE

I ask a lot of questions and when someone asks me a tough question I have to admit that I don't always have an answer.

This article will pose more questions than it will answer. The reason is simple – until you actually evacuate your building you can not know the answers.

When was the last time the fire alarm sounded at your business and the building was actually evacuated? Does your staff know their responsibilities? Do they act or do employees and guests just wait until the alarm is silenced? Is the fire company en route as soon as the alarm sounds or does your monitoring company call to find out what is wrong? Who is responsible for investigating the source of the alarm? Do you have floor wardens? What about roll call procedures? Do you know if all employees got out of the building? Is someone responsible for evacuating the handicapped/disabled/elderly employees and/or guests?

Or is the reason that you are not conducting an emergency evacuation because you don't want to inconvenience the members and guests using the club? Would your thought process be different if you knew that someone was going to be seriously injured or that you might have to answer to a grand jury inquiry?

## WHEN I WAS MANAGING CLUBS....

Many years ago when I was managing a downtown city club I did not know there were Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations regarding emergency evacuations and fire extinguisher use (this will be another article). I was working in a building constructed in 1846, installing a fire detection system and concurrently developing an evacuation plan. After the plan was developed, we conducted a drill to see if it worked. The staff was informed of their respective egress routes and a few weeks later an unannounced drill was conducted.

Well, after the alarm sounded, most staff members gathered at their respective roll call areas and the only employee who did not "get out" was the laundry room person. After the drill, we determined the reason she was "burned up" was she did not hear the alarm. A few months later another unannounced drill was conducted. Again, the laundry room person and a maintenance person were "burned-up." At this point, I was becoming more intelligent and realized that I should ask all the staff for their input!



The things I learned that day were amazing! First off, the people in the basement laundry area could not hear the alarm. The alarm was loud everywhere else, yet with the exhaust fan, washer and dryer noises there was no horn loud enough to be heard in this area. Situation resolved for under \$200.00 by adding a new horn. A dishwasher posed the next question and asked if the kitchen roll call gathering area next to the dumpster was the best place as it was right next to the gas main! A new location was immediately agreed upon and incorporated into the written plan.

## SHOULD WE JUST CONSIDER HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS OR ALL CLUBS?

A "high-rise building" as defined by the National Fire Protection Association is a building greater than 75 feet (25 m) in height where the building height is measured from the lowest level of fire department vehicle access to the floor of the highest occupiable story.

How tall is each floor at your club - 8 feet, 10 feet, 12, 20? Regardless if you are classified as a high-rise building or not, virtually all operations require an emergency plan and the following details pertain to you.

Following are various guidelines culled from OSHA's website regarding evacuation plans. More details may be found at: <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/evacuation/index.html>

## Actions employers should take to help ensure safe evacuations of high-rise buildings include:

- Don't lock fire exits or block doorways, halls or stairways.
- Test regularly all back-up systems and safety systems, such as emergency lighting and communication systems, and repair them as needed.
- Develop a workplace evacuation plan, post it prominently on each floor and review it periodically to ensure its effectiveness.
- Identify and train floor wardens, including back-up personnel, who will be responsible for sounding alarms and helping to evacuate employees.
- Conduct emergency evacuation drills periodically.
- Establish designated meeting locations outside the building for workers to gather following an evacuation. The locations should be a safe distance from the building and in an area where people can assemble safely without interfering with emergency response teams.
- Identify personnel with special needs or disabilities who may need help evacuating and assign one or more people, including back-up personnel, to help them.
- Ensure that during off-hour periods, systems are in place to notify, evacuate and account for off-hour building occupants.
- Post emergency numbers near telephones.

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## What should workers know before an emergency occurs?

- Be familiar with the worksite's emergency evacuation plan;
- Know the pathway to at least two alternative exits from every room /area at the workplace;
- Recognize the sound /signaling method of the fire /evacuation alarms;
- Know who to contact in an emergency and how to contact them;
- Know how many desks or cubicles are between your workstation and two of the nearest exits so you can escape in the dark if necessary;
- Know where the fire /evacuation alarms are located and how to use them; and
- Report damaged or malfunctioning safety systems and back-up systems.

## What should employers do when an emergency occurs?

- Sound appropriate alarms and instruct employees to leave the building.
- Notify police, firefighters, or other appropriate emergency personnel.
- Take a head count of employees at designated meeting locations, and notify emergency personnel of any missing workers.

## What should workers do in an emergency?

- Leave the area quickly but in an orderly manner, following the worksite's emergency evacuation plan. Go directly to the nearest fire-free and smoke-free stairwell recognizing that in some circumstances the only available exit route may contain limited amounts of smoke or fire.
- Listen carefully for instructions over the building's public address system.
- Crawl low, under the smoke to breathe cleaner air if there is a fire. Test doors for heat before opening them by placing the back of your hand against the door so you do not burn your palm and fingers. Do not open a hot door, but

find another exit route. Keep "fire doors" closed to slow the spread of smoke and fire.

- Avoid using elevators when evacuating a burning building.
- Report to the designated meeting place.
- Don't re-enter the building until directed by authorities.

## If trapped during an emergency, what should workers do?

- Stay calm and take steps to protect yourself.
- Go to a room with an outside window, and telephone for help if possible.
- Stay where rescuers can see you and wave a light-colored cloth to attract attention.
- Open windows if possible, but be ready to shut them if smoke rushes in.
- Stuff clothing, towels, or newspapers around the cracks in doors to prevent smoke from entering your room.

## A CLOSING THOUGHT

The first step when starting any program is the most difficult. Consider what events may befall your operation and then ask your employees for their input. Then recognize that every operation is unique whether by design, construction and /or location and what may work in California may not work in Maine. Other considerations may involve local fire codes and whether you are covered by Federal or a State OSHA program.

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