

Emergency Evacuation Planning for Multifamily Housing

Emergency evacuation planning is a key component to ensuring the safety and security of building occupants during emergencies. The foundation of successful evacuation planning is a comprehensive understanding of the hazards you may encounter at a site and its features.



Having Operable Fire Protection Systems

Your ability to protect your building occupants during a fire or other emergency, through either emergency evacuations or sheltering in place, depends upon advanced warning from operable fire protection devices, such as fire alarms, sprinkler systems, and voice communication systems.

Property owners must be familiar with the fire protection equipment installed within their buildings. These must be maintained (i.e., tested and inspected) according to applicable guidelines to ensure they are always in proper working order. Some of these features, such as smoke detectors, act proactively by providing early warning of a fire within the building. In contrast, some protection, like sprinkler systems, is reactive to protect life and property. A battery-operated smoke detector will be useless if the device has been tampered with or someone removed the batteries.



Developing Emergency Evacuation Procedures

Collaboration with Emergency Services

Organizations should work with their local fire departments when developing emergency evacuation plans. Department staff should be familiar with your building and your residents, specifically those who may need special assistance. Local fire departments can conduct walkthroughs of your building and provide insight on the directions to give to building occupants during emergencies.

Evacuating Residents That May Need Assistance

Your building may have occupants who will need assistance with evacuating during emergencies. These can include occupants with mobility disabilities, hearing, vision, or speech impairments, and cognitive disabilities. Identify these individuals in advance using a list maintained at the property office and shared with the local fire department. It's important to work with your fire department to ensure they know the residents who may need assistance before an emergency evacuation.

Emergency Evacuation Routes

Building owners must develop emergency evacuation routes and make them visible throughout all buildings. It is recommended that these routes be posted within individual apartment units, in common hallways, at staircase entrances, and in elevator lobbies.

Evacuation diagrams should show the basic layout of the building (by floor), including walls and doors. Color-coding items will make them easier to understand. The diagram should:

- Include a "You are here" point and mark the egress paths from that location.
- Identify stair enclosure doors or exterior exits marked with the word "Exit."
- Signify where the fire extinguishers and fire alarm pull stations are located.
- Mark exterior meeting areas.
- In addition, consider creating an evacuation diagram in languages appropriate for your community.

Emergency exits and evacuation routes must be well-lit and easily accessible. Ensure property managers and building maintenance personnel look for this throughout the day and during unit inspections. Stress this among residents and provide education on the dangers of blocking exits within their units and throughout the building. In the event of a power outage, emergency lighting should be in place and properly working to guide occupants out of the building.



Designated Assembly Points

There must be a designated meeting place after evacuating from a building. Identify this location, ideally close enough to the building but far away to keep a safe distance from the fire. Include this location on all emergency evacuation routes and procedures to ensure residents know where to go.

Your organization must have a method for tracking the successful evacuation of all building occupants. After an emergency, all occupants, including all residents and employees who were in the building at the time of the fire or other emergency, must be accounted for.

Maintain up-to-date emergency contacts for all occupants, as follow-up after an emergency may be necessary.

Conducting Evacuation Drills and Follow-Up

Facilitate evacuation drills in conjunction with your local authorities. The purpose of evacuation drills is to educate building occupants on the fire safety features of the building and egress routes and to follow procedures.

Conduct drills frequently to ensure familiarization with protocols. Hold a debriefing meeting following all evacuation drills to discuss what worked and what didn't. This will help identify areas for improvement and training opportunities for residents.



Temporary Arrangements for Displaced Residents

Consider planning with local hotels to secure special pricing for displaced residents. Collaborate with your community and work with local schools and churches to establish temporary shelters for displaced residents. Having these arrangements secured beforehand will help in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

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