



# Engineering

by Natalka A. Gluszko

## Planning for hotel fire safety is every managers' job

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! \*\*\*Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.\*\*\* College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

*Notice: The ideas, opinions, recommendations, and interpretations presented herein are those of the author(s). The College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University/The Rooms Chronicle assume no responsibility for the validity of claims in items reported.*

When making travel plans or checking into a hotel, many travelers are concerned with safety issues. They observe security personnel, look for surveillance cameras, scope out the parking lot for security precautions, and make sure the locks on windows and doors work properly. But how many hotel guests actually check for evidence of fire safety precautions? Chances are, not many do.

While the number of hotel fires has declined by approximately two-thirds in the past two decades, there is still plenty for travelers to be worried about. Nevertheless, there are several steps both hotels and guests can take to ensure that all precautions are met.

### Fire safety evolves for hotels

The 1980s saw a great increase in fire safety measures within the lodging industry. This spark in interest was due mainly to a series of serious hotel fires where several people died or were injured. The most famous of these fires occurred at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1980. Investigations into the MGM Grand fire exposed the fact that most of the fatalities in this case could have been prevented by the presence of smoke detectors, fire alarms, and sprinkler systems.

In response to these findings, fire safety organizations and various government bodies issued several laws and regulations to help hotels and motels boost their fire safety standards. One of the main contributors to the escalation of fire safety in the lodging industry is the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). The NFPA worked alongside the lodging industry to develop several different codes and regulations for all areas of fire safety, from prevention to control.

Congress also played a major role in fire safety with the passing of the Hotel and Motel Safety Act of 1990. This law stated that all properties of public accommodation must be "equipped with hard-wired, single-station smoke detectors in each guest room, in accordance with NFPA 72, and an automatic sprinkler system, with a sprinkler in each guest room in compliance with NFPA 13." Specifically, these codes were designed for traveling federal employees. These travelers are required, by law, to stay in hotels that comply with the Hotel and Motel Safety Act of 1990. To view a list of hotels and motels that obey this law visit the Hotel-Motel Master List on FEMA's United States Fire Administration website at [www.usfa.fema.gov/hotel](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/hotel).

Laws such as the Hotel and Motel Safety Act of 1990, and other regulations established by various fire safety organizations, have led to great improvements on a major component of fire fighting equipment: the sprinkler system. Thanks to modern technology that is constantly improving, there are currently several different, cost-saving options for hotel managers when it comes to sprinkler systems. One breakthrough came with the discovery that PVC pipes can be used for sprinkler systems instead of steel pipes. This switch in material not only reduced prices for installation, it also proved to be flexible in terms of size and range of coverage. Many hotels and motels look to preserve a certain atmosphere or historical décor. With the use of PVC pipes, these hotels can retain their ambiance while providing adequate safety measures.

Pictured below: It's a proven fact ... sprinklers in hotel guestrooms save lives. Most municipalities now require sprinklers in the guestrooms, common areas, and employees areas of new hotels being developed.



### What role does the hotel play?

While it is not expected that hotel managers memorize the different fire safety codes and regulations published by all the various organizations, guests demand and expect that hotels will take every precaution possible when it comes to fire safety. The first step is to create a binder designated only for fire safety guidelines and checklists. Managers need to become extremely familiar with major regulations, and follow all checklists designed to keep hotels within the guidelines of these parameters. Specific life-safety equipment, such as fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and sprinkler systems, need to be inspected regularly.

An important step prudent hotel managers and chief engineers will take is to establish a close relationship with the local fire department. General managers, chief engi-

neers and fire chiefs can work together to come up with a checklist specific for an individual hotel. Also, regular inspections conducted by the hotel's manager and the fire department can help identify any flaws with the hotel's emergency plans, familiarize fire department personnel with the hotel's physical layout, and identify the best locations for fire alarms, extinguishers, and sprinkler systems. Another consideration for hotels and motels is to provide a copy of the blueprints in advance to the local fire department. In the event of an emergency, this will give firefighters a detailed map of the hotel, which will help with a quick and effective search of the property.

Hotels and motels also need to properly train all employees for the event of an emergency. Again, having a close relationship with the fire department is essential since these experts can help create a specific plan to reduce the amount of time in the building and maximize the chance of survival.

Some general guidelines that all managers need to follow include: making sure that all personnel know where fire extinguishers are located, what sound the fire alarm for that particular property sounds like, where all emergency exits and stairwells are located, and what front desk employees need to grab on their way out. Generally, these employees should take reports stating what rooms are occupied, how many people are occupying these rooms, and keys that will unlock guest room doors. Other materials and information are left up to the preference of managers.

Another thing to keep in mind when training employees is that there are several types and degrees of fires. Employees are responsible to help guests to the best of their ability without putting themselves in immediate danger. Ultimately, dangerous situations should be handled by professionals who are properly trained in fire fighting and rescuing techniques.

### **Guest can protect themselves**

While a majority of the responsibilities concerning fire safety lay with the lodging property, there are several steps guests can take to ensure their safety during an emergency. Knowing several escape routes, being aware of smoking policies, and knowing how to open and close windows are some key steps guests can take. Should there be a fire, utilizing basic fire safety knowledge—staying low to the ground, placing wet towels over cracks, checking if the door is hot, and stop, drop, and roll—is vital for survival. If a guest becomes trapped in their room during a fire, they should place a light colored cloth outside their window for easy location, and should refrain from jumping if they are in a room over three stories high.

Many of these precautions apply to the guests, but more often than not, they do not practice them. Hotel employees should do everything possible to educate guests about emergency exits, smoking procedures, and the location of fire extinguishers, and alarms. Employees should also inform guests upon check-in of the location of sprinkler systems and fire alarms, and encourage guests to report any suspicious behavior or smells immediately.

### **Other steps to consider**

Fire safety is a vital part of all lodging properties. While this article provides some background and suggestions for fire safety, it is only the tip of the iceberg. There are several other steps, procedures, and regulations that all managers need to be aware of. When establishing a fire safety plan, begin with common sense, expand with research, develop a close relationship with local fire fighting forces, and continue to monitor changes in laws and regulations. ✧

### **Related articles from TRC:**

- Fire safety. Vol. 7, No. 1, pg. 11; Vol. 7, No. 2, pg. 10
- Fire prevention training. Vol.8, No. 6, pg. 12
- Fire extinguisher maintenance. Vol. 12, No. 6, pg. 8

*(Natalia A. Glusko is an honors student at Niagara University's College of Hospitality and Tourism Management where she is specializing in hotel management. Her practical experience includes working at the renown Hotel Barchetta Excelsior located in Como, Italy. She may be contacted at: [editor@roomschronicle.com](mailto:editor@roomschronicle.com).)*