



# Risk Management

by Raymond C. Ellis, Jr.

## Time to review the Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act and fire protection basics

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During the final quarter of 2008, TRC considered the critical subject of fire protection. It is a subject that **must** be a management tool in the operation of all lodging establishments, and is worthy of an annual review. October is fire safety month for many organizations.



### Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act

The Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act of 1990 was passed into law by Congress to save lives and protect property by promoting fire and life safety in hotels, motels and other places of public accommodation. Prior to the Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act, fire was all too often in the headlines with significant injuries and loss of life in lodging establishment fires. The Act was a most unusual legislative action. It permitted an option for the lodging facility to comply or to decide to not become involved with the requirements of the Act. It was a “carrot or stick” approach.

The law mandates that federal employees traveling on government business must stay in public accommodations that adhere to the life safety requirements in the legislation guidelines of the Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act. Additionally, the Act also states that federally funded meetings and conferences cannot be held in properties that do not comply with the law. The key provisions of the Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act required:

1. *Hard-wired, single-station smoke detectors must be installed in all lodging establishments.* This would eliminate potential problems resulting from dead batteries or batteries that had been removed for another purpose by guests. Unfortunately, the Act did not require that an annunciated system be installed as that would immediately indicate the location of the activated smoke detector.
2. *If the structure is four stories or higher, the property must have a full fire sprinkler extinguishment system installed.* After the MGM Grand Fire in 1980 and the Dupont Plaza Hotel fire in 1986, it was quickly realized that sprinklers can save lives and complete devastation of the property, especially for high-rise hotels. As a result of the Act, the hotel must have an automatic sprinkler system, with adequate sprinkler heads in each guestroom. Properties three stories or lower in height are exempt from the sprinkler requirement.

Now comes the carrot. If the hotel or motel wants to serve federal employees, it must comply with the two above requirements. This included both housing and meeting facility usage. A list of approved properties was established nationwide. To motivate the federal employee to use an approved facility, expenses would not be reimbursed if the employee stayed in an unlisted property in a community that had approved properties listed.

However, an interesting approach by the non-government traveler occurred. Meeting planners, travel agents, and corporate travel offices began to use the approved properties list for housing of their traveling clients and for meeting sites. They envisioned litigation where a fire occurred and the agency had failed to place their client in a fire-approved facility. They would be in an indefensible position.

*It worked!* By 1994 the National Fire Protection Association senior officers attended an AH&MA Board of Directors meeting in the Waldorf=Astoria in New York City to recognize the lodging industry for the significant reduction in fire incidents with attendant injuries and deaths. They further eliminated the hotel/motel listing from the annual residential fires as the statistical instrument would have charged the industry for events that never occurred. Should a serious incident occur, it would be

added to the annual statistics with an asterisk. Fortunately, there has been no need for an asterisk covering a serious hotel fire with multiple deaths and injuries.

### Emergency evacuation considerations

OSHA requires an emergency evacuation program for all employees. In this instance, the employee regulation also applies to the public and the guests on the premises. With possible changes in staffing due to the economy, ensure that all employees are aware of the emergency evacuation plan and their individual role in the implementation of the program. Be sure assignments to special duties in assisting with the evacuation are covered by employees and alternates selected from the current work force. Conduct an emergency evacuation drill quarterly.

This comprehensive standard requires direct employer and senior management involvement. It is necessary that the property have a continuous and unobstructed way of exit travel from any point in the building to a public way. The means of egress must have three separate and distinct parts: *the way of exit access, the exit, and the way of exit discharge*. When an exit is protected from other parts of the building, the separation shall have at least a one-hour fire resistance rating when the building is three stories or less. The separation must have at least a two-hour fire resistance rating if the structure is four or more stories in height.

This fire resistance rating is a technical area in which the building architects, the building department for the local jurisdiction, and the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ), usually the local fire chief or fire commissioner, will advise as to whether a hotel is in compliance. As employer, owner, owner-manager or manager, you should be aware that you are responsible for:

- Width and capacity of means of egress.
- Maintenance of floor load capacity throughout the structure.
- Provision of doors that open out to permit egress from a place of assembly.
- Elimination of mirrors or non-exit doors in the vicinity of the exit door that could cause confusion on the part of an individual making an emergency exit.
- Maintenance of exterior ways of exit from ice or snow or other obstructions.
- Ways of exit wherein a dead end is not in excess of 20 feet.
- Sufficient headroom for changes in floor elevation.
- Provision of fail-safe alarmed exit doors (If they fail to operate normally, they will open under an emergency system override.)
- Ensuring that furnishings and decorations do not obstruct exits, access thereto or visibility thereof. (This requirement is frequently violated when a platform or screen are set up in a meeting room in front of an exit door.)
- Where required, all automatic sprinkler systems and fire alarm signaling systems shall be maintained for immediate response capability.
- Ensuring that all passageways, stairways, or doors that are not part of a way of an exit be so marked with notice such as, "Not an Exit," Other specific warnings might include "To Basement," "Storeroom," "Linen Room," etc.
- Provision of appropriate signage with proper size and lighting to clearly define the way of exit, the exit, and the way of exit discharge.



### Fire SOPs

Have you established the following Standard Operating Procedures (S.O.P.) shared with all staff members?

- If you discover a fire, immediately sound the alarm and contact the operator or front desk to call the Fire Department.
- Determine if the fire can be safely extinguished by use of a portable fire extinguisher. If not, close the door to contain the fire in the area of origin, and notify guests and other associates to evacuate, using the fire stairwell. Never use an elevator to escape a fire. Assign an employee to assist any disabled guest. It

would make sense to develop a front desk roster of disabled guests for use in an emergency. This would be invaluable for first responders. Give the roster to the first fire department officer who responds to the alarm. They will know what to do from there.

- Train employees to report to a predetermined location away from the property to permit verification of full evacuation of staff. Employees may be assigned to verify that all guests have been evacuated. This practice should be reviewed with fire authorities.

## **Fire extinguishers**

Finally, do not overlook the need to inspect and maintain fire extinguishers:

- Although it may be permitted in your jurisdiction to eliminate portable fire extinguishers in a fully sprinklered property, it is recommended that dry chemical extinguishers (ABC) be installed. It makes good operating sense to have a trained employee “knock down” an incipient (just getting started) fire rather than to wait for a buildup of sufficient heat to activate a sprinkler head. Remember that once a sprinkler head is activated it cannot be shut off until the fire department arrives; there will be significant water damage in addition to fire and smoke damage.
- All fire extinguishers should be maintained in a fully charged and operative condition. They must be highly visible and readily accessible.
- Place extinguishers for Class A (wood, cloth, paper) so the greatest distance for an employee to access one is 75 feet or less.
- Place extinguishers for Class B (flammable liquids, gasses, oils, grease) so the greatest distance for an employee to access it is 50 feet or less.
- Place extinguishers for Class C (electrical fires) at 75 feet or less from electric cabinets, electrical boards or electrical switch rooms. Also, have them available for fan rooms and other mechanical equipment rooms. *Never use a water-based extinguisher on an electrical fire.*
- If your hotel or restaurant has a deep-fat fryer, there should be Class K extinguisher readily available. This is a wet chemical that attacks a fire deep in the fryer unit.
- Provide a hydrostatic test of the portable fire extinguisher canister on a six year schedule. This is easily accomplished by retaining a licensed, fire-service equipment company to perform these checks.
- Every extinguisher should be tagged indicating its last maintenance check, servicing and hydrostatic testing. Have the hotel’s security or engineering department check these tags and the general condition of the extinguisher on a weekly basis as part of their property walk-through procedures. Again, annual re-servicing and the six-year hydrostatic testing should be performed by a licensed, fire-service equipment company.

While hotels should be concerned with fire safety at all times, each October is the perfect time to revisit many of the aspects discussed above in more depth. ✧

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