

COVID-19: PREPARING FOR EMERGENCY EVACUATIONS

Guidance Document #6
Published: June 9, 2020

As a result of COVID-19, building owners and managers are implementing new office procedures and protocols to promote social distancing and exposure prevention. As these protocols are developed, property professionals should consider how to handle mandatory fire drill requirements and emergency or fire alarm evacuations. The following information can be used to help guide these discussions and offers considerations for building owners and managers as they review and update their evacuation procedures.

All changes to your fire and safety drills and evacuation procedure plans must be reviewed by your local fire official to ensure you remain in compliance with applicable fire codes.

EVACUATION DRILL REQUIREMENTS

Compliance with state and local fire codes requires building personnel to have a fire safety and evacuation plan that follows [International Fire Code \(IFC\)](#) requirements. Section 404 of the IFC covers evacuation plan preparation and procedures, while Section 405 focuses on the frequency and participation requirements.

For many commercial office buildings, evacuation drills must be conducted annually unless localities amend their code to a more frequent basis. If a building has ambulatory care facilities, educational (K-12) or institutional operations, evacuation drills may be required to take place on a monthly basis. Check with your local fire officials for further guidance on required drill frequency.

EVACUATION DRILL RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to review your existing evacuation procedures to determine if they can be amended to minimize potential exposure to COVID-19. Before you implement changes to your procedures, you will need to contact your local fire official to discuss your plans. Keep in mind that you must communicate any changes to your evacuation plans with your tenants to minimize any confusion.

Consider the following:

- Check with local fire officials for new guidance on fire drill frequency modifications.
- Ask local fire officials if they recommend suspending fire drills until social distancing requirements have eased or been lifted.
- If the local fire official does not recommend drill suspension, request that in lieu of a full-scale evacuation, a lockdown drill be conducted. Lockdown drills were included in the 2018 fire code. These are designed to practice procedures in the event of an active aggressor incident. Practicing these drills can raise awareness of emergencies without requiring an evacuation.
- If the fire official states that fire evacuations must continue as scheduled without changes, communicate to your tenants that fire drills will still be conducted. Check with state and local guidelines on the use of face masks. Where applicable, consider issuing them to tenants and require them to be worn in the event of an evacuation drill.

FIRE EMERGENCIES

While it is important to plan for fire drills, it is even more important to be prepared should an actual fire emergency arise. Evacuating a building during a fire emergency needs to be the primary objective and social distancing should be considered a secondary concern. In those cases where evacuation protocols conflict with social distancing requirements, exiting the building during a fire emergency should be given priority. The following recommendations explore other ways to mitigate exposure to COVID-19 during an evacuation:

- If a building has a complete fire sprinkler system, consider asking local fire officials for a “defend in place strategy” with a floor by floor evacuation. Buildings with voice evacuation systems are especially helpful to guide evacuations based on where the emergency occurs.
- Consider altering your reassembly areas. You should designate multiple assembly places that have enough space for social distancing requirements. Ensure that floor fire wardens are familiar with new assembly areas and have them disseminate information to their groups. If possible, mark evacuation locations where they can be plainly seen if those areas are under the building owners’ control. (Parking lots, green spaces, courtyard, etc.)
- Encourage tenants, staff and visitors to wear masks or face coverings when exiting the building after an alarm is activated. Supply floor wardens with extra masks they can use to disseminate to their groups.

CONCLUSION

Fire evacuations are an important part of building safety and any actions or changes taken must be reviewed and discussed with local fire officials. By working with your officials early on in the reentry process, you can continue to promote fire safety and mitigate further spread of COVID-19.

RESOURCES

- **BOMA International**
www.boma.org/coronavirus
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**
www.cdc.gov/coronavirus
- **Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resource Center**
www.coronavirus.gov
- **International Code Council (ICC)**
www.iccsafe.org
- **National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)**
www.nfpa.org

**For more information about BOMA International's coronavirus
and emergency preparedness resources, please visit:**

www.boma.org/coronavirus