

Fire Drill Importance During COVID-19 Pandemic

Many of our campus fire officials are in the process of updating or modifying fire reaction plans to incorporate the challenges that COVID-19 is presenting. Elements such as wearing masks, and adjusting meeting/gathering points to account for social distancing is being evaluated. A common dilemma being experienced is whether or not to start up the fire drills in September when the residence halls are reoccupied and the campuses are in full operation. The need for conducting fire drills may never have been more important now even though sensitivity may exist towards the additional disruption a fire drill being something to avoid. The University of Delaware has established fire drill frequencies based on occupancy type from three sources, International Fire Code, NFPA 1 and the Delaware State Fire Prevention Regulation.

<u>Type of Occupancy</u>	<u>Required Drills</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Participants</u>
Public Assembly	Yes	Quarterly	Employees
Educational "0-12 yrs"	Yes	10 Times /Academic Year	All Occupants
Healthcare	Yes	Quarterly on each shift	Employees
Residence Hall	Yes	4 Times/Academic Year	All Occupants
Mercantile	Yes	Periodically	Employees
*Business	(If > 500 Occupancy	Annually	Employees

As the month of September approaches, the UD Fire Safety staff is conducting resident hall fire safety surveys for hazards and deficiencies, but additional emphasis is placed on how best to safely evacuate dorms with occupant loads of 600+ residents. Areas of 48,000 SF to maintain social distancing at the gathering point will be quite the tasking to solve. It's imperative that we work closely with Residence Life and Housing to collaborate efforts to adjust residence hall policy and procedure, Resident Assistant Training and defining roles and expectations. A recent CSHEMA Fire and Life Safety CoP Listserve on 7/9/20 by Michael Engle EHS Director at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, AZ outlined some excellent points to consider moving forward. One was to create hand-outs to be added to the student welcome packets with emphasis on COVID-19 precautions and evacuation maps. Another point he emphasized is conducting the fire drills as "announced" by distributing the fire drill schedule. They will also be making announcements prior to the start in buildings with emergency voice or PA systems. This approach should prevent any anxiety and allow for pre-planned and staffed fire drills. Its important that the fire drills be informative teaching moments and not a mad dash against a stopwatch as we stress the need to alter our existing fire reaction/evacuation plans.

Another critical group to consider when revising reaction plans and planning fire drills is the campus laboratory and research community. While we don't currently have any undergraduate laboratory work currently being performed, the research efforts have stepped up activity to include COVID-19 vaccine and treatment development. Maker Spaces with PPE and face mask production has increased activity as well. Social distancing has reduced the occupant loads typically being 30 to 60% of posted fire safety postings depending upon the direction of state governors and other leaders. Reduced occupant loads in labs may have an effect on shutting down hazardous processes and other fire reaction measures

incorporated in the event of a fire incident or alarm. Like many campuses around the country, efforts are made to create one-way directional corridors and stairways to prevent face to face encounters during daily operations. Creating single points of entry and departure are also becoming common practices. While these measures will hopefully reduce the spread of the corona virus, they may also create confusion among the building occupants in the event of an alarm or emergency occurring in the building. At no time should the nearest available exit be passed during an emergency. Occupants need to be able to adjust to situation and make safe choices, even if they are in conflict to the COVID-19 markings. This is especially important when confronted with a stairwell with signs posted as “Up Only”. Occupants need to be aware to take all stairs down to the level of exit discharge during fire emergencies.

The last group I wanted to address is the Public Assembly Groups. Our campuses are all over the place in this regard right now. The amount of people allowed to assemble varies from place to place. Fall sporting events and concerts have been cancelled at UD during the Fall Semester. We’ve adjusted occupant loads to 80 SF per person in auditoriums and large gathering places. Some campuses are still pursuing Fall Sports and may include fans in attendance. Efforts to incorporate social distancing and even the use of masks which may be optional, adds to the challenges ahead of us. As fire safety officials, we must keep the requirements of fire codes in mind and not jeopardize the life safety of the people we serve. Our expertise with establishing occupant loads, crowd management training and emergency planning make us a likely source of guidance. Staying focused with the tasks at hand and applying the knowledge we’ve obtained over the years will serve our communities well and demonstrate the value of having knowledgeable and experienced fire safety staff on campus.

Kevin T. McSweeney, CFPS, CFI II
Treasurer

