



OSHA **FACT** Sheet

Evacuating High-Rise Buildings

The National Fire Protection Association defines “high-rise building” as a building greater than 75 feet (25 m) in height where the building height is measured from the lowest level of fire department vehicle access to the floor of the highest occupiable story. Appropriate exits, alarms, emergency lighting, communication systems, and sprinkler systems are critical for employee safety. When designing and maintaining exits, it is essential to ensure that routes leading to the exits, as well as the areas beyond the exits, are accessible and free from materials or items that would impede individuals from easily and effectively evacuating. State and local building code officials can help employers ensure that the design and safety systems are adequate.

When there is an emergency, getting workers out of high-rise buildings poses special challenges. Preparing in advance to safely evacuate the building is critical to the safety of employees who work there.

What actions should employers take to help ensure safe evacuations of high-rise buildings?

- Don't lock fire exits or block doorways, halls, or stairways.
- Test regularly all back-up systems and safety systems, such as emergency lighting and communication systems, and repair them as needed.
- Develop a workplace evacuation plan, post it prominently on each floor, and review it periodically to ensure its effectiveness.
- Identify and train floor wardens, including back-up personnel, who will be responsible for sounding alarms and helping to evacuate employees.
- Conduct emergency evacuation drills periodically.
- Establish designated meeting locations outside the building for workers to gather following an evacuation. The locations should be a safe distance from the building and in an area where people can assemble safely without interfering with emergency response teams.
- Identify personnel with special needs or disabilities who may need help evacuating

and assign one or more people, including back-up personnel, to help them.

- Ensure that during off-hour periods, systems are in place to notify, evacuate, and account for off-hour building occupants.
- Post emergency numbers near telephones.

What should workers know before an emergency occurs?

- Be familiar with the worksite's emergency evacuation plan;
- Know the pathway to at least two alternative exits from every room/area at the workplace;
- Recognize the sound/signaling method of the fire/evacuation alarms;
- Know who to contact in an emergency and how to contact them;
- Know how many desks or cubicles are between your workstation and two of the nearest exits so you can escape in the dark if necessary;
- Know where the fire/evacuation alarms are located and how to use them; and
- Report damaged or malfunctioning safety systems and back-up systems.

What should employers do when an emergency occurs?

- Sound appropriate alarms and instruct employees to leave the building.
- Notify police, firefighters, or other appropriate emergency personnel.
- Take a head count of employees at designated meeting locations, and notify emergency personnel of any missing workers.

What should workers do in an emergency?

- Leave the area quickly but in an orderly manner, following the worksite's emergency evacuation plan. Go directly to the nearest fire-free and smoke-free stairwell recognizing that in some circumstances the only available exit route may contain limited amounts of smoke or fire.

- Listen carefully for instructions over the building's public address system.
- Crawl low, under the smoke to breathe cleaner air if there is a fire. Test doors for heat before opening them by placing the back of your hand against the door so you do not burn your palm and fingers. Do not open a hot door, but find another exit route. Keep "fire doors" closed to slow the spread of smoke and fire.
- Avoid using elevators when evacuating a burning building.
- Report to the designated meeting place.
- Don't re-enter the building until directed by authorities.

If trapped during an emergency, what should workers do?

- Stay calm and take steps to protect yourself.
- Go to a room with an outside window, and telephone for help if possible.
- Stay where rescuers can see you and wave a light-colored cloth to attract attention.
- Open windows if possible, but be ready to shut them if smoke rushes in.
- Stuff clothing, towels, or newspapers around the cracks in doors to prevent smoke from entering your room.

Because every high-rise building has unique characteristics involving location, design, construction, and occupancy, this document covers only some of the basic considerations for safe evacuation. This publication does not substitute for a site-specific evacuation program nor does it detail specific OSHA or OSHA-approved state plan standards that may be applicable to individual worksites. Likewise, it does not create independent legal obligations. In addition, OSHA citations can only be issued for violations of the OSH Act, OSHA standards, or OSHA regulations.

How can I get more information on safety and health?

OSHA has various publications, standards, technical assistance, and compliance tools to

help you, and offers extensive assistance through workplace consultation, voluntary protection programs, strategic partnerships, alliances, state plans, grants, training, and education. OSHA's *Safety and Health Program Management Guidelines (Federal Register 54:3904-3916, January 26, 1989)* detail elements critical to the development of a successful safety and health management system. This and other information are available on OSHA's website.

- For one free copy of OSHA publications, send a self-addressed mailing label to OSHA Publications Office, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., N-3101, Washington, DC 20210; or send a request to our fax at (202) 693-2498, or call us toll-free at (800) 321-OSHA.
- To order OSHA publications online at www.osha.gov, go to **Publications** and follow the instructions for ordering.
- To file a complaint by phone, report an emergency, or get OSHA advice, assistance, or products, contact your nearest OSHA office under the U.S. Department of Labor listing in your phone book, or call toll-free at **(800) 321-OSHA (6742)**. The teletypewriter (TTY) number is (877) 889-5627.
- To file a complaint online or obtain more information on OSHA federal and state programs, visit OSHA's website.

References

City of Alexandria, Virginia Fire and EMS Department. *Fire Safety in High-Rise Buildings*. http://ci.alexandria.va.us/fire/1_2_1_5.html.

National Fire Protection Association. *NFPA 101 Life Safety Code 2000*.

National Safety Council, Data Sheet 1-656-Reaf. 85: *Evacuation Systems for High-Rise Buildings*.

Seattle, Washington Fire Department. *Information Bulletin #982: High Rise Fire Safety Requirements*.

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies, or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to *Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations*. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999. See also OSHA's website at www.osha.gov.