



Are You Prepared for a Fire Emergency?



BY BRAD
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In this day and age, it's very important for communities to be proactive in the area of life safety, whether it is a single building, a multi-unit building, or an entire community. Through my years of experience in the life safety business, more often than not, I have found communities to be unprepared and lacking a plan. As residents and managers of your communities, there are several ways to prepare and make these events as minimal as possible, and even prevent collateral damage that can happen to unprepared communities. Here are a few examples of what you can do to be prepared before an event.

FIRE EXTINGUISHERS

Fire extinguishers should be readily accessible, available on all levels of a building, and maintained on an annual basis. Because this may be your first line of defense in the event of a fire, all occupants or residents should become familiar with the closest fire extinguishers. Instructions can be found permanently affixed on the units for proper use, and with proper training can avert further damage.

ADDRESSES

Your address should be clearly marked on the front of your building and easily visible from the street fronting the property (in contrasting color), not hidden by landscaping, lit up if possible, and maybe a street sign at the main entrance with alternate signs if requested by the fire department.

ACCESS TO PROPERTY

One of the things to consider is preparing your property for accessibility by the authorities having jurisdiction (AHJ). A Knox box (www.knoxbox.com) or key vault will allow the fire department access to keys necessary to enter your building or community in the event of an emergency during business hours and after hours. These key boxes or vaults should also be easily accessible and visible, and the keys and access cards kept in these boxes should be checked regularly for functionality or changes and should be coordinated with your local fire department. These keys should



be individually marked with a durable tag and permanent marking ink. Also, include an accurate description equal to the door label or map. A Knox box or key vault is a safe and secure way to store keys and can have multiple purposes including storing site plans, drawings of your building,

An advertisement for Castle Group. It features a smiling woman in a tan blazer holding a crown. The Castle Group logo is in the top left. Text includes "Unparalleled Property Services", "The best people", "The best communities", and "The best property management". At the bottom, it says "Over 30 years of managing Homeowner and Condominium Associations of Distinction", "800-337-5850", "www.castlegroup.com", and a QR code.

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and emergency contact information. Other items you may want to consider are having a list of disabled people, pets, and a detailed map or drawing of your building, or a map of all buildings if multiple buildings. A site plan will include addresses and/or building numbers, hydrant locations, fire lane locations, and fire department connections (FDCs). Maps and any paperwork should be laminated to be durable under all conditions.

Be aware of your gate access for emergency vehicles. Whether it is a controlled or non-controlled property access, fire departments must have access and will require you to provide access for gated subdivisions through the use of a device or a system. Check your gates and see if there is proper clearance and signage. If there is less than 13 feet and six inches of clearance, there must be a visible sign stating the actual clearance. Your fire action plan may also include allowing the fire department access through an alternate means of entry, for heavy or oversized equipment.

Once the fire department has gained access to your property, it may be necessary to locate the nearest hydrant, FDC, or post-indicator valve (PIV). Make sure that these are properly marked and mounted adjacent to the connection, labeled for the building they serve, and are in operating condition. FDCs should be clear from bushes and any obstructive items (minimum three feet), and there should be a path from the roadway, fire lanes, parking lot lanes, and/or combination thereof to the FDC. All rooms, suites, and units should be properly identified and clearly marked—for example, pump room, electric room, elevator room, etc.

The code may provide certain features, which include a fire alarm system, a fire protection system, resident smoke detectors, an automatic fire sprinkler system, fire extinguishers, and exiting means. These items are very important to the preservation of life, as a whole or in part. However, we recommend you walk your property to look for any changes in your systems such as a pilot light not lit, FDC damaged or stolen, valves leaking, debris or landscaping blocking systems, or any changes from prior observations.

WILL THE OCCUPANTS OR RESIDENTS OF YOUR BUILDING BE ABLE TO EXIT SAFELY IN THE EVENT OF AN EMERGENCY?

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If your building is protected by a fire alarm system, it is recommended to have scheduled fire drills, whether it is a volunteer evacuation type drill or an audible test to familiarize your occupants with the sounds and evacuation paths. Be sure to notify your local fire department prior to these events. Stairwells should be marked with exit signage readily visible from any direction. Occupants should become familiar with primary and alternate exit means out of the building. Also, invite occupants to visit or use stairwells to become more comfortable, in case of an emergency. Each landing in a stairwell should be marked with the stairwell number and floor number, and should be clearly visible with door open or closed,

and labeled if “no-roof-access.” If discharge from the stairwell does not directly exit to the outdoors, a means of egress should be continuously maintained, free from all obstructions or impediments to full instant use, in case of a fire or an emergency.

Have a layout of your community—whether it is a map or list and photographs for visual verification—with all sprinkler valves, valve connections, and what areas they cover. Also, keep a list of preferred vendors for fire damage restoration. These will include fire alarm, fire sprinkler, electrical, water extraction, window and door replacement, and insurance companies. This should be kept in a hard book, preferably a three-ring binder. In case of emergency, fire, accident, or a leak, you can have an immediate response to isolate or stop any further damage.

I recommend that communities become more proactive, which includes inviting your local fire inspectors or responder teams to visit your location. This would include inviting all shifts to visit your property for a more tactical look and have someone with knowledge from your facility and/or property to do a walk-through and show them features, protection apparatus, access, special rules, and situations. When evaluating your budget, take into consideration a new approach to enhancing your community. In addition to your landscaping and structural enhancements, consider new technologies that may provide enhanced security or fire protection. Remember, there is no price you can put on a life!

Brad Higdon is President of Bass-United Fire & Security Systems, Inc. in Pompano Beach, FL. For more information, visit www.bassunited.com. ■

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