

# FIRE DRILLS

## Introduction

Fire safety and evacuation plans outline staff duties and responsibilities in time of emergency. On-going training is required to help ensure that staff is aware of those duties and responsibilities. Fire drills serve as an opportunity for staff members to demonstrate, under simulated fire conditions, that they can perform those duties and responsibilities safely and efficiently. It's also a time for them to show that they are aware of *defend-in-place* strategies and can take advantage of your facility's fire safety features and egress facilities to protect the people in their care.

Fire drills are more than an exercise designed to evaluate staff response to a simulated emergency. They are also a test of your facility's fire safety/evacuation plans and staff training programs. Not all fire drills run smoothly. That's okay, so long as staff and management learn from them and correct mistakes made. It's important, therefore, that there be a critique of each drill so that any problems encountered can be addressed. Perhaps the problems are due to incomplete or outdated fire safety/evacuation plans. Perhaps there's a need for additional staff training.

## Certification requirements

NFPA 101(12), Sec. 18.7.1.6/19.7.1.6 requires that fire drills be conducted quarterly on each shift.

## State licensure requirements

MSFC(15), Sec. 405.2 and Table 405.2 also require that fire drills be conducted quarterly on each shift. As specified in Sec. 405.5, records must be kept of these drills. At a minimum, these records must include:

- Identity of the person conducting the drill
- Date and time of the drill
- Notification method used
- Staff members on duty and participating
- Number of occupants evacuated
- Special conditions simulated
- Problems encountered
- Weather conditions when occupants were evacuated
- Time required to accomplish complete evacuation

## Fire drills – The basics

Guidance and direction in the conduct of fire drills can be found in NFPA 101(12), Sections 4.7, 18.7.1.4/19.7.1.4 and 18.7.2/19.7.2 and in MSFC(15), Sec. 405. Some important points to remember:

1. Responsibility for the planning and conduct of fire drills must be assigned to a competent person.
2. MSFC(15), Sec. 405.1 requires that drills be designed in cooperation with local fire authorities. When required by the fire code official (i.e. fire chief or fire marshal), prior notification of drills must be given to the code official. Periodic meetings (at least annually is recommended) should be held with the local fire code official. This presents an opportunity to not only discuss fire drill procedures, but also to review your facility's fire safety/evacuation plans and staff training

programs. It is strongly encouraged that, on a biennial or triennial basis, the fire department be asked to participate in a fire drill (such drills must, however, be carefully planned – advance notice should be given to residents to avoid upsetting or exciting them).

3. It is expected that all persons subject to the drill will participate (if some staff members are allowed to be excused from drills, there is a danger that, in an actual emergency, the evacuation and relocation process will be compromised).
4. Nursing home residents should participate in drills *to the extent possible*. Infirm or bedridden residents are not required to be moved during drills; however, relocation of such residents should be practiced using simulated residents or empty wheelchairs (e.g. a staff member can be used to pose as a resident, so that staff must physically remove a person from the room of fire origin, as they would during an actual fire situation).
5. Drills must be scheduled on a random basis – they need to be held at unexpected times and under varying conditions to simulate the unusual conditions that can occur in an actual fire. Fire is unpredictable. Staff must be able to react to the conditions present and adjust their actions accordingly to ensure a safe and orderly evacuation. Conducting drills at varying times using different locations and scenarios not only tests their ability to do so, but makes them confident enough that the potential for confusion or panic under actual fire conditions is significantly reduced. If staff can remain calm and self-assured under emergency conditions, there is less likelihood of upsetting or exciting the facility's residents and visitors.

**Note:** It is important that the date, time and location of your fire drills sufficiently vary so that no pattern is detectable in either the same month or shift. Care should be taken to ensure that only 2 of the 4 drill times in the same shift are within 1 to 1½ hours of each other. It is recommended that a fire drill schedule be developed in advance of each calendar year and that, to ensure that drill times continue to be varied, the times of the preceding year's fire drills be reviewed prior to establishing the fire drill schedule for the next year.

6. There are a number of ways that can be used to alert staff of a fire in a fire drill scenario including:
  - Place a sign, flashing light, picture of a fire or red-colored cloth in the area of simulated fire origin.
  - Hand a note to a staff person outlining a fire scenario they've just discovered.
  - Activate a manual fire alarm pull box and have staff respond accordingly.
  - Activate a nurse call light to simulate a resident discovering a fire in their sleeping room.
7. Fire drills must include the transmission of a fire alarm signal [A coded announcement is allowed to be used instead of audible alarms when drills are conducted between 9:00 PM (2100 hours) and 6:00 AM (0600 hours)]. If the fire alarm system hasn't already been activated, staff should be expected to activate the nearest fire alarm box. Because the alarm is to be sounded during drills, it's important that the company or agency monitoring the fire alarm system be notified in advance of the drill to avoid dispatching the fire department. It's equally important that the monitoring company/agency be contacted after the drill to verify the time that an alarm signal was received and to serve notice that the drill has been completed. *Verification of receipt of the fire alarm signal by the monitoring company should be documented on the fire drill report.*

**Note:** When a coded announcement is used instead of audible alarms on the night shift, the fire alarm should be sounded first thing in the morning the following day to meet the requirement that each drill include "transmission of a fire alarm signal".

8. The drill must include complete evacuation of the smoke compartment containing the area of simulated fire origin and all occupants (actual or simulated) moved to a safe location (e.g. an adjacent smoke compartment is preferred or another floor if necessary). The emphasis when conducting drills needs to be on safe and orderly evacuation rather than speed.
9. An important part of each drill is the practicing of your facility's procedures for accounting for employees and occupants (including visitors) after evacuation has been completed. If a method isn't in place to account for everyone once evacuation or relocation is complete, it is difficult to measure the success of your fire safety/evacuation plan. It also makes search, rescue and fire attack activities more difficult for emergency responders.
10. The drill isn't complete until an ALL CLEAR signal has been given by the person in charge of the drill. MSFC(15), Sec. 405.9 has specific requirements dealing with recall and reentry:
  - Any electrically or mechanically operated signal used to recall occupants after an evacuation must be separate and distinct from the signal used to initiate the evacuation. Using similar signals can cause confusion that can lead to a slowing or even halting of evacuation under actual emergency conditions.
  - The recall signal initiation means must be manually operated and under the control of the person in charge of the drill.
  - No one may reenter the area evacuated until authorized to do so by the person in charge of the drill. This is to help ensure that occupants do not reenter prematurely under actual emergency conditions.

### DOCUMENT your drills

Almost as important as conducting the drill is documenting the fact that it occurred. A sample form has been developed by the Minnesota State Fire Marshal Division (SFMD). The form can be used "as is" or serve as a guide that you can use to create your own fire drill record. In any case, you must ensure that your form includes all the information shown on the SFMD form (*this includes verification of receipt of a fire alarm signal by the fire alarm monitoring company*).

It is important that at least two people in your facility know where your drill records are kept to increase the likelihood that they can be readily provided if requested during an inspection. It is recommended that these records be maintained for at least three years.