

OFPC information BULLETIN

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The Fire Code of New York State contains two requirements for notification of the fire department: section F401.3 which requires that the fire department be immediately notified in the event an unwanted fire occurs on a property; and, section F401.3.2 which requires that the fire department be immediately notified upon receipt of a fire alarm signal. These provisions are intended to ensure that building owners, managers or staff do not waste vital time if a fire occurs, or by investigating the source of a fire alarm system activation, before notifying the fire department. Such delay can be deadly if a fire has occurred.

In response to the tragic March 2009 fire in a community group residence in the Adirondack community of Wells that claimed the lives of four residents, the commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) requested the Office of Fire Prevention and Control to conduct an independent review of the design, construction, code applicability and operational features of the residence to ensure they met applicable fire and life safety codes and to verify operation of fire protection systems.

For purposes of determining compliance with the fire code provisions pertaining to fire department notification, OFPC assesses whether the fire department is immediately notified whenever a building fire alarm system is activated and the alarm notification appliances (bells, horns and strobe lights) sound or flash to warn building occupants. If the fire department is not immediately notified, if there is a delay in order to investigate the source of the alarm before notifying the fire department, there exists a violation of the Fire Code of New York State.

As a result of OFPC's review, a number of these residences, particularly those operated by OMRDD, have modified procedures to ensure immediate notification to the fire department upon fire alarm activation as they are required to do so by law. In some cases fire departments may experience an increase in runs. This is not due to a sudden increase in false alarms or alarm system malfunctions but is rather the fire department being notified as required, where previously notification was delayed in order for facility staff to "self-investigate."

While OFPC understands the impact increased responses have on fire departments, ignoring legal requirements is not something OFPC can condone. To reduce any impact on fire departments, OFPC is committed to working with OMRDD, building owners and fire departments to reduce the numbers of unintentional fire alarm system activations. OFPC will work with any group that asks, to educate building occupants to change behaviors which result in alarm activations and/or review possible engineering options pertaining to the installation of fire detectors.

The Fire Code of New York State considers the safety of building occupants to be of utmost importance. That is why it requires automatic and manual fire alarm systems in specific high risk occupancies and permits no delay in notifying the fire department when an alarm occurs. It does not consider building owners, managers or staff to be qualified to determine whether a building is safe when a fire alarm system is activated. That is why it requires immediate notification of the fire department who can respond and determine the safest course of action.

As fire safety professionals, we all understand the tragic consequences of delayed response. Time is everything in rescue and fire suppression operations and these code requirements are in place so the fire department is not disadvantaged from the start in the event of a fire. When a fire alarm occurs, who better to determine if it is safe for building occupants than the fire department?

OFPC also wants to remind fire departments that pre-planning is one of the most valuable tools available for aiding in effectively controlling a fire or other emergency incident. In simple terms pre-incident planning ensures that responding personnel know as much about a facility's construction, occupancy, operations and fire protection systems as they can before an incident occurs. Pre-planning isn't always easy, it takes commitment and effort on the part of the fire department. Even in these days of growing demand for our time, OFPC advises fire departments across the state to be proactive in this important endeavor, especially as it relates to community group homes, nursing homes, assisted care facilities and other specialty residential occupancies. The information gained, relationships forged and increased confidence will benefit everyone.

OFPC knows that fire service professionals across the state are working hard as to ensure the safety of all New Yorkers. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this issue, please contact the Office of Fire Prevention and Control's Bureau of Fire Prevention.



NYS Department of State

OFFICE OF
**FIRE PREVENTION
& CONTROL**

phone 518.474.6746

fax 518.474.3240

email fire@dos.state.ny.us