

Title 19 Annual inspections

Annual inspections by the fire department are performed to assess and mitigate potential fire- and life-safety hazards in buildings. Most fire departments provide you with a written report of any corrections that are necessary. These inspections vary in type and frequency, depending on the jurisdiction, city, and state. How the fire inspectors perform these inspections also varies dramatically from area to area.

The type of inspection performed is related to several issues. It's important to have some understanding of codes, standards, and ordinances in the jurisdiction, and how they may affect your inspection. Codes tell you what requirements need to be met, and what features of fire protection (e.g. fire-sprinkler system, fire-alarm system, etc.) need to be installed.

Generally, codes are promulgated by consensus groups made up of industry representatives, such as code officials, manufacturers, system installers, special experts, etc. Standards tell you how to properly install equipment or systems required in the code.

NFPA 101 and the Intl. Fire Code are standards that were created through the consensus process. Both codes and standards are updated on a regular basis, with normal revision cycles every 3 years.

Training and experience of the inspector also impacts the inspection process, and can negatively or positively influence your inspection. Most inspectors have a boss, so feel free to ask for a second opinion if you're not comfortable with your fire inspector. Different types of occupancies may have different requirements. The processes or products used in a building may also require different systems or protection. If the building is a special use, such as a high-rise, there are additional code requirements.

While many people look at the fire- and life-safety inspection process negatively, these inspections benefit the building/business owners, as well as those who use the building, by offering:

- A safer working/living environment for employees/residents.
- A safer building for unfamiliar occupants (visitors, shoppers, clients, etc.).
- Business and job security. Up to 80 percent of all small businesses that experience a large fire never reopen; this not only affects the building/business owner, but also results in the loss of jobs. Of the businesses that do reopen, many lose much of their customer base due to prolonged absence of production or service.
- A better-maintained building for improved resale value. It is commonplace for buyers to hire a company to inspect the building prior to purchase to identify potential hidden costs related to fire and life safety.
- A possible reduction in insurance premiums. Some items may be required by both the fire department and your insurance carrier, such as annual fire-sprinkler and fire-alarm inspections verifying proper system maintenance. Many insurance carriers give businesses premium reductions for properly installed and maintained fire-protection systems.

Preparation is Important to Passing Your Fire Inspection

Preparing for the annual inspection is key to developing a good working relationship with the fire inspector and gaining positive results. Using a general checklist can help you prepare for the inspection.

The inspection from a fire department may be unscheduled, depending on occupancy type. If the fire inspector arrives unannounced, and it's inconvenient for you - or you're unprepared - it's acceptable to ask that the fire inspector reschedule the inspection.

Meet with the inspector prior to beginning the actual inspection and ask what types of items the inspector will be looking for. Give the fire inspector copies of all of your system or equipment inspection, testing, and maintenance (ITM) reports. Review these reports with the inspector prior to his/her walkthrough, and let the inspector know that any issues noted previously have been corrected. Make sure a responsible person is available to accompany the fire inspector with keys to all areas, and take notes (even though the inspector will likely give you a report when the inspection has been completed). These notes may give you additional insight into the inspector's thought process, and may provide valuable information for future inspections.

Maintaining fire-protection features is critically important for fire and life safety within buildings. Fire-protection systems' ITM and results reports are required by all the national codes and standards, and likely by your insurance carrier.

Fire-protection and fire-alarm systems have become much more complex and far more technical in the past decade. Many fire inspectors lack expertise in these systems, and have to rely on highly trained field personnel (i.e. contractors) for support. When hiring a contractor to perform ITM for your building, make sure he/she is reputable and takes the time to explain any items that require your attention. As with most other things, you get what you pay for. Price is important, but make sure the fire-sprinkler or fire-alarm company is going to provide you with a quality inspection and complete report. Review the report and make corrections prior to your scheduled fire inspection (make sure you get a corrected report once the items have been repaired).

The following issues are either common reasons for noncompliance, or may require outsourcing to others for completion ...

Maintaining the means of egress is critical to providing proper life safety in your building. Making sure all exit doors are always accessible and open properly is important. Also make sure that fire-rated areas, such as stairways and corridors, have features like fire doors, self-closing devices, releasing mechanisms, and latches that have been installed properly and are operating. No combustible materials can be stored in any portion of the means of egress, and no storage can reduce the required width or block exits.

These are items that fire inspectors will check. If the fire inspector finds problems, he/she will spend more time checking additional equipment. It's better to make sure that any equipment the fire inspector checks has been properly checked and maintained. There are companies that will perform testing and maintenance on many of these items in one visit, such as emergency lighting, exit signs, fire extinguishers, single-station smoke alarms, etc. Make sure all your heat-producing appliances are properly maintained by authorized personnel, including all manufacturing equipment, furnaces, and hot water heaters.

Storage of combustible materials must be maintained in an orderly fashion, away from flame-producing appliances, and at least 18-inches below the fire sprinklers. Any combustible or flammable liquids must be in approved containers and storage cabinets. There are specific limits on the amount of combustible and flammable liquids by type of occupancy, as well as specific storage arrangements.

There are also items that need to be addressed to help emergency-response personnel do their jobs better, including making sure the building address is clearly visible from the street, and that access to the building is not restricted. National codes now require that buildings allow fire departments safe and immediate access.

The most common means of doing this is with fire department lockboxes. These are special fire department master-keyed lockboxes, mounted to the exterior of the building. The building owner provides building keys that the fire department puts into these lockboxes for future use. The lockbox should be readily accessible to the fire department. If you've changed locks in your building and have a fire department lockbox, make sure you have extra keys available at the time of inspection for the fire department to replace the current keys in the lockbox.

Additionally, the fire department connection (FDC) that allows the fire department to supply water to a sprinkler or standpipe system must be clearly visible and readily accessible. All fire hydrants should also be clearly visible and accessible.

Electrical-related issues, such as making sure all cover plates are installed on all electrical receptacles, should also be addressed. It's required that circuits be properly labeled on all electrical panels, and that clear access of 30 inches must be maintained in front of all electrical panels. Extension cords are not allowed except where used for temporary power; all extension cords must be heavy duty, in good condition, and for small appliances. All extension cords are required to be grounded, and if multiple items need to be plugged in, power strips with built-in circuit breakers are to be used, and must be plugged directly into a permanent receptacle.

Finishing the Inspection Process

Stress your concerns about making the building as safe as possible by working positively with the fire department to achieve compliance. Ask questions and make sure you fully understand all issues. If there are corrections required, identify who is responsible for making these. If the building owner is different than the business owner, then responsibility must be determined for each item. In many cases, the building owner and business owner are responsible, by lease agreement, for different items. It needs to be identified for the fire inspector who is responsible, and who will communicate these items to the responsible party, if not present.

If there are costly items requiring attention, discuss alternatives and compliance timeframes with the inspector. Most fire inspectors are willing to negotiate a longer time period since the inspector is most interested in gaining compliance and making your building safer without causing you financial difficulties. Not all compliance items cost a great deal of money or require great effort. Many can be operational issues and are easily corrected.

Finally, close on a positive note by thanking the fire inspector for his/her concern for you and the building occupants, and schedule a date for completion of any compliance items. Always negotiate realistic compliance and/or progress check dates if you need additional time, or if the issues require money not readily available.

In many types of occupancies, security vs. fire and life safety is an ongoing challenge. In some occupancies, security can be a major concern for theft or unauthorized access from both outside and within a business. Actions that may be taken as a result include securing doors with unapproved locks, chaining doors, covering doors so they're not readily discernable by building occupants, etc. There are always options available, however, that can satisfy both concerns. Talk with your fire inspector to resolve these issues so your building is both safe and secure.

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