

Fire and life safety compliance in residence halls

Safety and security in residential halls is a top priority for college campuses of any size today

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Security and safety in residential halls is a top priority for college campuses of any size today. Students move into dorm rooms and on-campus housing with personal property of considerable value, including computer systems and electronics. In addition, personal safety and protection have become critically important elements of campus security programs.

Features of a well-secured residence hall include:

- All doors, including perimeter and room entryways, controlled by one networked system that records and monitors everyone who enters or exits the building
- Access control systems on each floor
- Security cameras by all residence hall entrances
- Appropriate interior and exterior lighting

Locking systems, access control programs and notification systems have become essential security elements for many campus residential halls. Residential security components found on campuses today include:

- Exterior doors that remain locked part or all of the time. These doors require identification for entry into the facility. Automatic locking systems provide advanced security with computerized access systems that may be tied into campus security networks. Manual locking systems require residence hall staff or campus security professionals to lock the doors
- Access-controlled doors. Latches can be electronically controlled by the campus security network system. Doors must be readily opened by a push from the inside and meet a number of other safety requirements. They cannot include delayed egress locks, but otherwise may be installed in virtually any school building

Online access control systems usually have methods to monitor events and record what happens at the point of entry. Offline systems rely on cardholder identification and access information programmed into a reader device physically located at the door.

- Access card control systems. Smart cards that carry unique student identifiers can be programmed to allow access into certain facilities, including residential halls. Card readers installed at the entrances allow access to the building verify identification before allowing persons in the building
- Automatic door closers and locking systems. These self-closing doors reduce incidences of unwanted access into dorm rooms and residence hallways
- Video surveillance systems. Video cameras can record everyone entering or exiting the building. In a networked system, the recordings can be received in real-time by the campus security network located away from the residence hall. Cameras also provide a visual deterrent to would-be criminals

An almost universal problem with residence hall security focuses on student apathy toward security procedures and a lack of awareness about potential threats to their personal or physical safety. Students and staff members oftentimes prop open interior and exterior doors. Some residents allow nonresidents or persons not known to them to enter a building without proper identification. They provide access codes and keys to other people without concern for the safety of themselves and their fellow residents.

One method for preventing access to groups of nonresidents is to install a locked vestibule (or mantrap) where only one person can enter at a time. Anti-passback features on access cards force cardholders to use their credentials to exit and enter. The card is only valid when used in the correct sequence. Photo identification on cards enables resident assistants to check photos on the access credentials.

Central to the success of a residence hall security program is ongoing training – of staff and students – as well as strict enforcement of campus security policies. Safety personnel may be assigned as liaisons to residential halls. Student-led committees may help to establish security rules that are consistent with campus guidelines. In some cases, financial penalty systems may help to curtail security violations.

Fire prevention in residence halls

Every commercial building, including residential halls, has one or more fire doors on the premises. They protect both human lives and property by containing fire in one part of a structure. They also prevent smoke and fumes from passing from the area of the fire to other parts of the building, while still making it possible for people to escape.

Fire doors are typically installed within fire walls. Both fire doors and fire walls are made of materials that are not easily combustible. They are usually mandated in all buildings in North America. Smaller commercial buildings may only have one or two fire doors/walls, while larger properties may have dozens or even hundreds of them.

Some of the most common places where fire doors/walls are located within commercial buildings are:

- Between units. Commercial buildings with multiple units and lessees are often required by local building codes to have fire walls/doors separating each unit. If fire breaks out in one unit, the fire wall keeps the fire from damaging other units in the same building
- Doors leading to stairwells. Multi-storied buildings are usually enclosed by fire walls. Entrances to and exits from stairwells take place through fire doors. This prevents fire and smoke from entering stairwells, allowing people to escape. It also helps prevent fires from spreading between levels
- Exterior walls. Certain exterior walls on commercial buildings may be made fire resistant. Local building codes usually determine if and which exterior walls must be non-combustible

Fire doors must pass a series of laboratory tests in order to be certified as such. Once tested, they receive a rating based on their ability to prevent the spread of fire over a specified period of time at a particular temperature. For example, a fire door may be rated for “three hours.” This means that the door has been tested by subjecting it to fire with a temperature of 1,925 degrees Fahrenheit, and the door withstood combustion for three hours.

All individual components of the door, therefore, must also be able to withstand the same type of fire as the door itself. This includes door hardware like closers, latches, thresholds, hinges and locks. Doors that have been tested prior to sale are produced with components that meet the same standards as the rest of the door.

However, problems can arise when components need to be replaced after installation. Campus maintenance crews are sometimes unaware of where fire doors are located within facilities, or how existing fire doors are rated. This can lead to potential problems when it comes time to replace components like locks.

Maintenance supervisors should familiarize themselves with the types of doors that are installed in residential halls. Three-hour fire doors must be outfitted with three-hour fire rated locks. Failure to do so will likely lead to fire breaches, resulting in property damage or loss and possible human injury or even death.

Fire code provisions include:

- Egress doors shall be readily openable from the egress side without the use of a key or special knowledge or effort
- Doors shall be arranged to open readily from the egress side whenever the building is occupied
- Locks, if provided, shall not require the use of a key, a tool, or special knowledge or effort for operation from the egress side
- Key operation shall be permitted, provided that the key cannot be removed when the door is locked from the side from which egress is to be made

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