

Don't Go Up in Flames

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Fire safety systems maintenance is essential during the pandemic.

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Due to COVID-19, the retail landscape is changing at a moment's notice because of custom expectations and city- or state-mandated closures. And, according to the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) Fires in Vacant Buildings report, "... in 2011–2015, U.S. fire departments responded to an estimated average of 30,200 structure fires per year in vacant properties." These fires resulted in a yearly average of 60 civilian deaths, 160 civilian injuries as well as \$710 million in direct property damage. When closures can occur at a moment's notice, and retail spaces are forced to shutter their doors, who is responsible for the maintenance of fire safety equipment and systems?

Through the closures, reopenings and even reclosures brought on by the pandemic, questions about stopping or delaying fire safety systems inspections, testing, maintenance and repair activities have been common. Thus, the NFPA has provided guidance on the need to continue to keep buildings safe for occupants and the community. Some areas that facilities must consider prior to modifying any fire protection inspection, testing maintenance and repair schedule (ITMS) include:

- Life safety and egress is, in many cases, dependent on fire protection systems operating properly. If ITMS activities are reduced or eliminated, facilities increase the risk of these systems not operating properly in an emergency.
- Emergency responders rely on these fire protection systems to contain or suppress a fire so that it does not grow uncontrollably, requiring more resources than anticipated or available.
- Due to lack of consistent occupants acting as early identification of issues, buildings that are unoccupied or have reduced occupancy are at additional risk.
- The pandemic has stretched on longer than anyone anticipated so if a facility is considering delaying ITMS activities, the natural question is: for how long?

Unfortunately, there is not a "one-size-fits-all" answer to any of these questions. Each facility is unique in the community it serves, as well as the types of systems that are installed to protect it.

Considerations for Reopening

Fire safety challenges for businesses extend well beyond ITMS activities. If a facility has been shut down, there are important considerations that must be factored into the process of reopening safely. At each facility, consider evaluating the conditions of:

- Fire Sprinkler Systems and Fire Pump Systems (NFPA 25) — Active and in good working order.
- Fire Alarm Systems (NFPA 72) — Active and free of trouble, supervisory or alarm conditions.
- Fire Extinguishers (NFPA 10) — Present and in good condition.
- Fire Doors, Emergency Lighting, and Exit Signs (NFPA 80 and NFPA 101) — Functional and in good condition.

Responding to the challenges of the pandemic, businesses have become creative in the use of their available space. This may include changing the use of a specific room, from office to classroom, for example. This may have unintended consequences for egress, suppression, notification and other fire safety features and systems.

Use of storage space is another example. Even if a room or area was always used for storage, introducing more hazardous products, such as large quantities of hand sanitizer, may initiate a need to reevaluate the protection provided. Many of these products are classified as flammable or combustible liquids, and they create unique hazards that must be properly mitigated. It is incumbent on the business to have a qualified review of the change in use and to work with the jurisdictional authorities for approval.

Where ingress or egress paths and patterns have been modified in order to provide for appropriate social distancing, it is imperative professionals evaluate and confirm that sufficient egress is provided.

Some facilities may even want to keep doors open in order to limit contact with surfaces and reduce the spread of COVID-19. However, it is essential to ensure that fire doors are not prevented from closing automatically in the event of an incident.

Moving Business Forward Safely

There are many business adjustments for owners and facilities managers to consider in order to continue to operate and service their communities. While fire safety subjects may not be top of mind due to the pandemic, it is essential to realize their importance and work together to keep communities safe and productive. Businesses are vital to a community's character and vitality. They are essential to who we are, so they have a significant responsibility to communities to remain viable and safe during these times while mitigating risks.