

National Board of Fire Underwriters

(A National Organization of Capital Stock Fire Insurance Companies Established in 1866)

COMMITTEE ON FIRE PREVENTION AND ENGINEERING STANDARDS

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Bulletins of Special Interest to Fire Department Officials.

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FIRES IN PLACES WHERE PEOPLE ASSEMBLE

When fire swept through a Negro dance hall in the deep South with a loss of life of 207 persons, the general feeling of the public was that such a happening could not occur in the larger cities, where places of this kind were subject to local regulations and were under the inspection service of building departments and fire prevention bureaus.

The stampede and death by fire, totaling nearly 500 persons, in the Coconut Grove night club in Boston, was a rude awakening, and this was followed in two weeks by a holocaust in Newfoundland which caused the death of more than 100 people.

The questions which naturally come first to one's mind are whether such a catastrophe can occur in his community, and what can be done to prevent such occurrences?

Where people congregate in groups of 100 or more there is a grave probability of overcrowding, with a corresponding danger of panic. This danger is increased by the lack of knowledge of the persons as to the location of exits, the absence of suitable exit signs and by the quickness with which fire may spread through combustible decorations. Such places exist in nearly every community. Not all of them are of the class which would be called a dance hall, a cabaret or a night club. Restaurants, ballrooms in hotels, auditoriums in clubs, school or society halls, and vestries or like places in churches may at times become overcrowded, and be deficient in exits or have an excess of flammable decorations.

The correction of conditions introducing possibilities of death or injury is not always easy. The first step is the giving of power to some one in authority to inspect these places, and next to have the unsatisfactory conditions corrected.

There can be no question but that adequate exits should be a requirement, but exits alone are not the answer. Even with an excess of doorways, and of stairs and other exit provisions, there is the possibility of panic, together with actual ignition of clothing and the inhalation of deadly gases. The general tendency is for people to try to get out by the same doorway they used in entering. The adequate marking of other exits and direction as to how to get to them should be insisted upon.

There are other necessary conditions; these are often the ones most difficult to correct. The impression has been given, in some instances, that lack of enforcement of some of the existing laws indicate indifference or incompetency on the part of the enforcing officer. The fact is many of the changes believed necessary will involve large expenditures of money and therefore enforcement is not easy.

One item having a marked influence on the panic hazard is that of overcrowding. Where seats are not fixed, it becomes hard to maintain aisles, and rules against standing or of providing seats in aisles are de-

liberately disregarded. Few laws or ordinances cover this item except in theatres.

Another vital factor greatly increasing the life hazard is the lack of knowledge, on the part of those within the place of assembly, of where the exits are located. Few regulations specify any marking of exits or the installation of signs indicating the direction to the exit.

There are two other important considerations, neither of which are usually adequately covered by legislation. These are the structural features of the building and the combustibility of decorations. Open stairways have provided means for the quick spread of fire and of suffocating or toxic gas, and in some cases there have been other factors, such as poor firestopping in walls and floors, the use of frame construction, and failure to protect against fires in other parts of the building or in other buildings.

Combustibility of the contents of a place of assembly is one feature which will be hard to control. Decorations of various kinds, draperies and furnishings are often considered essential. These are usually very flammable. They can and should be made flameproof. Some materials, such as nylon and acetate base rayon, cannot be flameproofed, and many processes must be renewed, sometimes at intervals of six months.

The installation of an automatic sprinkler system will go far towards making life safety a fact in any place of assembly. It would be ideal to install protection of this kind throughout places of assembly, especially if structural conditions are poor, or flammable decorations are used, and even a partial system covering the greater hazards would improve conditions. It cannot be considered as a burden to require extinguishers in kitchens, storerooms and places where hazards exist. Nor is it a hardship or a cause for expense to require that all employees be required to know the location of exits, aisles and stairways, and how to operate any extinguisher and hose line. It should be the definite duty of some one or more persons to check all exits, to see that the door is not locked, that panic locks will work and that revolving doors can be collapsed.

Enforcement of regulations of the kind needed for places of assembly will require frequent inspection. These preferably should be by the fire department. They should be made in such a way as not to inconvenience the people in such places of assembly, but unless some of the inspections are made during the period of occupancy there will be no chance to check up on the amount of crowding and whether aisles and exits are kept clear.

Finally, life safety cannot be obtained unless the community or the state has adopted suitable regulations. As a basis of such regulations, the National Board of Fire Underwriters has prepared a model ordinance or law entitled "An Ordinance Providing for Safety to Life in Places of Assembly." Copies can be obtained upon request to the National Board of Fire Underwriters, 85 John Street, New York, New York.