

Where There's Smoke

By Reg P. Wydeven
October 20, 2007

When I was a kid in grade school, we all looked forward to fire drills. After all, they were a 10-minute distraction from the drudgery of math class, and they allowed us to get outside for some fresh air.

When we were in college, my roommate Hark and I would typically sleep through the fire drills conducted by our dorm. We figured that if there was a real fire, we could always slip out our first floor window.

Since I've started working at our office, we've never had a fire drill. More importantly, we've never had a fire. However, each year, there are 5,000 office fires in the United States, and like us, most companies have no plan in place to respond to one. According to experts, building occupants have only minutes to escape in the event of a fire, sometimes as few as two.

Businesses are encouraged to develop emergency evacuation plans, including regularly conducting fire drills. Businesses and employees should remember the following emergency tips:

- Identify and practice using at least two escape routes from your workstation, and memorize the number of desks or cubicles there are between you and the exits in case you need to escape in the dark.
- Evacuate calmly and quickly, following the building emergency evacuation plan.
- Stay low and under the smoke so you breathe cleaner air if there is a fire.
- Touch doors before opening them to determine if they are hot and a fire is on the other side; only open cool doors.
- Never use an elevator when evacuating a burning building.

If you are trapped in the building because of a fire:

- Get as far away from the fire within the building as possible, to a room with an opening window if possible. Call for help if you can.
- Stuff clothing, towels or papers in cracks around doors to prevent smoke from entering.
- Stay where rescuers can see you and wave a bright-colored cloth to attract attention.

Last week was Fire Prevention Week. To recognize this week, if your business doesn't have a fire evacuation plan, make it a goal to implement one by the end of the year. Fire prevention week was started in 1911 by the Fire Marshals Association of North America (now known as the International Fire Marshals Association) to commemorate the fires that devastated Chicago and Peshtigo on October 8, 1871. The Fire Marshals wanted to inform the public about the importance of fire prevention.

The Great Chicago Fire ended up killing more than 250 people, leaving 100,000 homeless, destroying more than 17,400 structures and burning more than 2,000 acres. Contrary to legend, the fire was not started by Mrs. Catherine O'Leary's cow. The Peshtigo Fire is the most devastating forest fire in American history. The fire burned down 16 towns in Northeast Wisconsin, killing 1,152 people and scorching 1.2 million acres.

In 1920, President Woodrow Wilson issued the first National Fire Prevention Day proclamation, and according to the National Archives and Records Administration's Library Information Center, Fire Prevention Week is the longest running public health and safety observance on record.

So please implement a fire evacuation plan. After all, your employees may like a 10-minute distraction from the drudgery of paperwork, and they may enjoy getting outside for some fresh air.

This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2007 McCarty Law LLP. All rights reserved.