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Life Safety 101

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Are industry regulators or the local fire marshal knocking on your door? Are you confident in your facility's compliance with applicable codes?

While model building codes such as the IBC are enforced by building officials only when a structure is constructed or renovated, building safety codes and standards are routinely being enforced in existing buildings by local fire departments, OSHA and other regulatory bodies. Building professionals are noticing an upward trend in the enforcement of the **Life Safety Code (NFPA 101)** in private-sector facilities, most notably health care organizations accommodating overnight patients. Some believe it is only a matter of time before this trend is reproduced in other types of facilities where people spend the night.

Overview: The primary purpose of the *Life Safety Code* is to protect the safety of building occupants during a fire. Requirements are organized by occupancy type, as they vary substantially among different types of buildings. Code requirements for high-occupant buildings and/or those containing sleeping accommodations are generally more stringent than for other building types. The bulk of requirements for any occupancy fall under one of the following categories:

- **Means of Egress** - (or safe way out) consists of three components: exit access, exit, and exit discharge. The *exit access* includes the path you travel from wherever you may be standing when danger is perceived to the point you reach the exit. The *exit* begins at the point you are sufficiently protected from the fire. In multi-story buildings, the exit usually begins as you enter the stairwell. An *exit discharge* consists of the path between the protected exit and a public way.
- **Protection** - requirements include fire resistance, detection, alarm, extinguishment, and compartmentation. Satisfying requirements in this category can be a balancing act between sprinkler systems and fire resistance: greater sprinkler coverage can significantly reduce other code requirements.
- **Building Services** - requirements include specific provisions for building systems such as utilities, HVAC systems and elevators.
- **Operating Features** - building owners are required to develop evacuation plans, conduct routine inspections, maintain exits in a safe and unobstructed condition, and

to limit storage and use of hazardous materials which could compromise the safety of occupants.

Common Misconceptions:

- People sometimes say a building is “grandfathered” and therefore not required to comply with building codes. **There is no legal basis for this!** However, the *Life Safety Code* and other codes provide specific exceptions for existing buildings and the requirements are generally less stringent.
- It is often assumed that electrical panel rooms are required to be enclosed with fire partitions or fire barriers. However, unless an electrical room contains oil-insulated or dry-type transformers rated at or above 112 ½ kVA or is considered an “electrical vault” there are no fire resistance requirements for walls surrounding electrical rooms.
- Fire and smoke dampers are commonly assumed to be required at all locations where a duct penetrates a fire or smoke rated assembly. In fact, there are significant code exceptions which sometimes permit ducts without dampers.

In order to better assist our valued clients with their code-compliance concerns, Gobbell Hays Partners, Inc. specializes in the following areas of service:

- Comprehensive Life Safety Assessments
- Turn-Key Building Life Safety Improvements
- Environment of Care Life Safety Mock Surveys
- Life Safety Consultation and Peer Reviews
- Owner Representation for a Variance or Code Appeal
- Expert Witness and Litigation Support
- Life Safety Drawing and Document Management
- Architecture / Building Design

About the Author:

Micah Padgett is a registered architect with over 10 years experience in the construction industry. In addition to his expertise as an architect, Micah brings experience from prior employment as a general contractor. He has represented building owners at code appeal hearings and has assisted building officials with code reviews for building permit applications. In recent months, he has been heavily involved with comprehensive life safety assessments and building life safety upgrades for various health care organizations.



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