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To test or not to test: It is the law to have your fire alarm systems tested and inspected

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I've heard it all. "I didn't know I was supposed to," I know I should but I've been here for ten years and no one ever asked," "I'll just wait until I get a summons." The answer is that it is the law, and every authority having jurisdiction over fire prevention in City of New York says you have to. Code references with respect to fire alarm system testing and inspection procedures are sited in the NFPA, the NYC Building code, the FDNY reference standards and the ECB. You should know that it is now a criminal act to be in non compliance, and all codes specifically state that the responsible party is ..."The owner." Most importantly is that when a devastating fire results in loss of life, the defendants insurance representatives will have no problem proving gross negligence for failure to comply with NYC code. Doesn't sound good does it? Enough said, what do you have to do?

1. Use an approved company. The FDNY provides a list of approved companies on the web which you can find at http://www.nyc.gov/html/fdny/pdf/fire_prevention/instruct_smoke_detectors.pdf . These companies meet the licensing requirements by providing proof of experience in the form of Level II (NICET) Certification in fire alarm technology. Furthermore, ask to see "certificates of fitness" from the individuals that come to maintain your system. Personnel servicing your system must pass an exam administered by the FDNY.

2. Beware of "ghosting." A low price is no bargain if your company doesn't does job for real. Smoke detectors must actually be pulled and cleaned. This is accomplished by means vacuuming or compressed air and then the units must then be calibrated to factory settings. Newer intelligent microprocessor based systems display calibrations directly at the control panel. All of this data must be logged onto the appropriate documents. If you are not possession of any books or records stating the results of these tests then you are not getting what you're paying for. These documents must be made available for inspection and belong on the premises.

The NFPA has specific charts for the testing and inspection frequencies of all type of devices in your fire alarm system. To put it briefly, every device must be visited twice a year. Other organizations such as JACHO that monitor hospital facilities have more stringent codes which requiring quarterly testing. It is possible for you to have several AHJ's (authority having jurisdiction), your insurance company for example may also mandate fire prevention requirements.

When do you require Central Station Monitoring?

It is mandatory to constantly monitor the status of any sprinkler booster pump or standpipe fire pump by an FDNY approved Central Station. The code has provisions that the system may be connected to a "building office" in lieu of an approved central station when "maintenance personnel are in attendance 24 hours a day." This stipulation was intended for large commercial institutions that employ skilled personnel around the clock that are trained in the maintenance and repair of these systems. Doorman and concierge personnel do not meet the intent of this code. Once again, try to

prove the skill set of a doorman to have investigated the failure of your non working sprinkler system when you are defending a wrongful death lawsuit.

Requirements for J2 Residential Occupancies with 4 or more dwelling units:

Waterflow switches and valve supervision for trash service chutes are required to be connected to a sprinkler control panel with Central Station connection. Waterflow alarms for sprinkler systems are required when more than 36 heads are installed in a fire section or fire area.

Smoke detection system requirements provide for smoke detectors in mechanical rooms, electrical switchgear rooms and electric and telephone closets over 75 s/f.

Smoke detectors are also required at the top of all elevator shafts. Elevator smoke detection as well as sprinkler waterflow alarms shall activate phase 1 elevator recall.

Duct smoke detection is also required on the supply of any system greater than 2000 CFM. These systems must be connected to a fire alarm control panel and must shut down the HVAC unit. Self contained line voltage detectors are not acceptable under this code.

Watch for upcoming articles on the new NYC construction codes which take place in 2008.

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