

Could this Happen to My Premises?

Last year in the United States, tragic circumstances resulted from nightclub fires.

Two incidents occurred in February 2003 and resulted in more than 100 deaths in total and many more serious injuries. Concerns have been raised about the possibility of such events occurring here in the Yukon.

In the first incident, 21 patrons died and 55 were injured in Chicago when they tried to evacuate through the only available exit from a second floor nightclub. The local Fire Commissioner was quoted as saying, "that the nightclub was operating in violation of a month-old court order to close it down". Factors contributing to the deaths included locked and blocked doors and overcrowding.

In the second incident, 96 patrons died and another 150 were injured when fire broke out in a nightclub in Providence, Rhode Island. A pyrotechnics display is reported to have set fire to acoustic material that surrounded the stage. While it appears the number of exits were sufficient for the occupant load, there has been a suggestion that not all were available for use. In addition, many of the patrons believed the fire was part of the show.

As an owner or operator of a licensed premise such as a cocktail lounge or other assembly establishment, and on the heels of these events, you may have asked yourself "Could this happen in my premises"? Although there are many questions to be answered about the circumstances that led to these particular tragedies in the U.S., owners and operators are reminded that they are responsible to comply with the National Fire Code of Canada, and should review their facilities and operations to ensure that they are operating safely.

The following checklist may assist you in assessing the safety of your premises.

Occupant Load

- Ensure that the number of people in the building does not exceed the seating capacity as marked on your liquor licence(s).
- Adhere to the established seating capacity for specific areas, such as separate rooms, outdoor patios, etc. and ensure that 'migration' does not result in overcrowding in one area.
- Post your liquor licence(s) in a conspicuous place near the liquor service area. A notice of seating capacity sign may be requested for posting near the entrance.

Fire Alarm System

- Maintain operable systems.
- Inspect systems on regular basis.

Exits

- Keep exit paths clear of any obstructions, including temporary storage and garbage containers, both inside and outside.
- Keep exit doors operable at all times.
- Ensure exit doors and doors providing access to exit can be readily opened without requiring keys, special devices or specialized knowledge.
- Remove dead locks and draw bolts. Ensure that alternative exits are not chained or locked for security purposes.

Exit Signs

- Provide adequate exit and directional signs.
- Ensure signs are visible from the exit approach.
- Maintain illumination on the signs while the building is occupied.

Emergency Lighting

- Provide adequate emergency lighting.
- Maintain lighting in operating condition.

Interior Finish

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- Ensure interior finishes have appropriate flame-spread ratings.

Fire Extinguishers

- Ensure correct type and distribution of extinguishers.
- Ensure that extinguishers are easily accessible and properly maintained.

Fire Safety Planning

- Implement an approved fire safety plan, including the training of staff in emergency procedures, and means to communicate instructions to occupants in an emergency.
- In the case of an assembly occupancy with a very large occupant load, or where there are vulnerable occupants such as children, special procedures for evacuation by staff must be detailed in the plan and reviewed periodically with staff.
- Consider the use of crowd managers knowledgeable in public safety where a facility houses large occupants' loads.

Pyrotechnics/Fire Arts/Open Flames

- Follow procedures for obtaining approval for pyrotechnics events.
- Assign knowledgeable staff to closely monitor these activities.

Other Applicable Requirements

- Maintain your current liquor licence(s).
- Do not serve alcohol to patrons who show signs of impairment.
- Ensure that any changes to your facility satisfy the appropriate authority (such as the building, fire, municipal bylaw, or public health officials).

When large numbers of people gather there is always the potential for tragedy. However, you can reduce the likelihood of such a tragedy occurring by paying particular attention to good fire prevention practices. As clearly illustrated in the Rhode Island fire, fire can spread with deadly speed. Fire departments simply cannot respond quickly enough. It is important to make sure that a fire does not get a chance to start in your establishment.

For more fire safety information and Fire Code requirements, or for specific questions or concerns related to your premises, you may wish to contact the Yukon Fire Marshal's Office at (867) 667-5217 or by fax (867) 667-3165.

Note: The mission of the Fire Marshal's Office is to contribute to an environment for the residents of Yukon that is safe from fire and other public safety hazards by providing leadership and expertise in the reduction and elimination of these hazards.