

Seattle Permits

—part of a multi-departmental series on City services & permitting

Fire Safety Building Inspections (Non-High Rise)

October 2021

The Seattle Fire Department (SFD) conducts inspections of multifamily residential, commercial, and industrial buildings. These inspections occur annually or every-other-year based on characteristics of the building. Inspections provide a good opportunity for SFD to educate you on steps you can take to keep your building safe. The goal of the inspections is to decrease the number and severity of fires. It is SFD's mission to preserve lives and protect property.

This Client Assistance Memorandum provides information about the regular building inspection program, which does not include high-rise buildings. For more information about SFD's high-rise building inspections, please see <http://www.seattle.gov/fire/business-services/high-rise-inspection-program>.

SFD's Building Inspection Program

SFD inspectors conduct building inspections in the period from February to November each year. The inspections are conducted by on duty fire fighters—the same personnel who will respond to your building if you dial 9-1-1 with a fire or medical emergency.

You do not need to make an appointment for your inspection. There is no charge for the first inspection during the year, and there is also no charge if one re-inspection is needed. If violations are still not resolved after one re-inspection, additional inspections will incur a fee or a penalty.

During the inspection, SFD personnel will make routine inspections of all public spaces, which include areas like hallways, exit balconies, assembly rooms, utility and laundry rooms and garages. They will also confirm contact information for the property.

Keep Your Building Fire Safe and Prepare for a Successful Inspection

Building owners and managers can play an active role in keeping their buildings fire safe. By being aware of common fire safety code violations that our inspectors look for, you can also help ensure your building inspection goes smoothly and no violations are found. The following is a list of several typical violations found by SFD inspectors, and steps building owners can take to reduce them. This is not a complete list of violations or steps to achieve fire code compliance, however if you address items on the list below, you will have a good start on building safety and passing your inspection.

Blocked Passageways and Exit Doors

- Keep passageways clear — you must have a means of exit in the event of a fire.
- Remove obstructions from exits, aisles, corridors, and fire escapes. Do not let deliveries, furniture, or other items clutter hallways and corridors.
- Keep emergency exit doors completely unblocked as well.

Emergency Lighting and Exit Signs

- Where an exit sign is required by fire code, that sign must also be illuminated so people can find their exits at the time of an emergency. Signs alone are no longer sufficient means of highlighting emergency exit points.
- Provide approved exit signs at every required exit.
- Repair and maintain lighting for corridors, stairways and exits.
- Maintain emergency power equipment for exit lighting and signs.

Fire Extinguishers

- Fire extinguishers are normally required, and if



provided, they must be inspected annually by an SFD certified technician, with a tag indicating the date of the inspection.

Testing/Maintenance of Fire Alarms, Sprinklers, and Other Fire Protection Systems

- Fire protection systems like fire alarms and sprinklers are among the most important components in any building type for preserving lives, protection of property, and providing safety to first responders.
- The building owner or lessee is required to maintain these systems in good working condition and have them tested, usually on an annual basis. It is unfortunately common for our inspectors to write violations regarding systems that are *past due* for testing or systems that have *deficiencies that must be repaired*.
- For more resources on having your system tested or repaired, please see Client Assistance Memorandum [#5971](#) “Testing of Fire Protection Systems and Emergency Responder Radio Amplification Systems”.

Street Address and Occupancy Load

- It’s important that your street address number is posted in a conspicuous place over or near the front door entrance, to help emergency responders find your address quickly.
- Be sure you have posted an “occupant load” sign near the main exit in assembly rooms of 50 or more. The occupant load is a number that indicates how many people are allowed to assemble in the room or space. The occupant load number displayed on the sign must match the approved occupant load from the Certificate of Occupancy. For more information about Certificates of Occupancy see: <http://www.seattle.gov/fire/business-services/permits#annualassemblyoccupancies>.

Required SFD Permits for Assemblies and Hazardous Materials

- A Fire Department permit is needed for operation of places of assembly (100 or more occupants, or 50+ occupants if using candles or open flame).
- Fire Department permits are also needed to store or use certain hazardous materials and to conduct certain hazardous processes. For more information on

whether you need a permit, see: <http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Fire/Business/ActivitiesRequiringaSFDPPermit.pdf>

- Make sure your permit is up to date and available for the SFD inspector.

Fire Doors

- Fire doors serve a distinct purpose in the event of a fire and can help to contain heat and smoke. Leaving fire doors wedged open to promote easy access or exit points to a building is prohibited. They may only be held open by an approved device and should be kept closed at all other times.

Electrical “Housekeeping”

- Year after year, this is one of the top sources of violations in Seattle, and also one of the biggest causes of fires. To help you avoid violations in this category, you should know:
- Extension cords or cables can only be used on a temporary basis and must not be installed for permanent use. They must not be connected into each other and should never be attached to permanent fixtures or pass through holes in walls.
- A clearance of 30 or more inches must be maintained in front of electrical panels.
- Any significant electrical outlet must remain covered. This applies to junction boxes, circuit breaker panels, and any type of outlet box.

Storage for Combustibles

- You can avoid violations by taking steps to store dangerous materials appropriately.
- Use approved containers only for storage of combustible rubbish or waste material.
- Do not store combustible material closer than two feet to the ceilings in non-sprinkled areas. In areas with sprinklers, do not store materials closer than 18 inches to the ceiling.
- Find appropriate places to store combustibles. Do not store combustibles underneath exit stairs or in exits or in mechanical or electrical equipment rooms or boiler rooms.

Smoke Detectors/Carbon Monoxide Alarms

- Provide and install smoke detectors in sleeping rooms, common areas, and adjacent to sleeping areas.
- Many multi-family residential units also require carbon monoxide alarms. A good approach can be to install a combination smoke detector/carbon monoxide alarm. For more information see Client Assistance Memorandum #5121 "[Carbon Monoxide Alarm Requirements in Residential Occupancies](#)".

Walls and Ceilings in Good Repair

- Openings in fire resistive construction must be repaired (walls, ceilings, unsealed chases).

What Happens If The Inspector Finds a Violation?

In general, when an SFD inspector observes a violation of the fire code, the inspector writes a correction notice or "notice of violation". The notice will provide you with information about what needs to be addressed and will provide a timeline for you to make the corrections—generally about two weeks. The SFD inspector will return after the timeline has elapsed to confirm you have resolved the violations. If the violation is not yet resolved, your case will be referred to the Fire Marshal's Office for additional inspections to gain compliance, and each of these inspections will include a re-inspection fee. In 2021, the fee is \$373 per inspection. For serious violations, the fire code include fines of up to \$1,000 per day and prosecution in a court of law.

In some cases, including blocked exits and failure to test or maintain a fire protection system, the inspector may issue the responsible party (generally the building owner) a citation. A citation is a non-criminal notice of violation that includes a monetary penalty.

If you receive a citation, you must respond within 15 calendar days in one of three ways:

1. Pay the citation.
2. Request a mitigation hearing to explain the circumstances. In some cases, a mitigation may result in a lower penalty. The mitigation hearing must be requested in writing using the citation form mailed/served to you, and you must resolve all of the violations noted in the citation *prior* to the hearing.
3. Request to contest the citation, if you believe the

cited violation did not occur or that the person cited is not responsible for the violation. The hearing to contest the citing must be requested in writing using the citation form mailed/served to you.

Please see also the information from the City of Seattle Hearing Examiner: <https://www.seattle.gov/hearing-examiner/citations>