

## Fire and Life Safety

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**Purpose:** To educate National Apartment Association (NAA) members on the importance of fire life safety in apartment communities. It is the responsibility of the property owner/manager to oversee physical health and safety of residents and employees. The goal of this best practice document is to provide guidance on systems pertaining to life safety and careful monitoring to ensure compliance and optimal working conditions.

**Applies to:** Property Managers, Service Managers, Maintenance Technicians and all other NAA members who are involved in onsite life and safety operations.

### Guidance:

1. **Fire Alarms** – It is the building owner or manager’s responsibility to make certain that fire alarm inspections are completed at the necessary intervals and properly documented. The main goal of a fire alarm inspection is to confirm that a system or component is working properly, in the proper location, free from physical damage or any condition that could impair the fire alarm’s operation. All exterior alarms must be annually inspected and approved by an accredited fire safety equipment company.

Fire alarm testing involves operational inspections in which the system components are activated and their proper operation is verified. These tests cover many different devices and system components including:

- Smoke detector sensitivity test
- Notification appliance audibility/intelligibility
- Battery load tests
- Manual pull stations
- Fire panel communication test
- Emergency phone test (pool/common area)

Creating a service schedule that meets national and local code requirements is important to maintain. The goal is to ensure systems are operating within the optimal ranges for peak performance.

2. **Fire Extinguishers** — Every state has different regulations regarding how many fire extinguishers are required in each apartment building. The regulations can be specific per apartment or based on square footage. Contacting your local city’s fire department’s non-emergency number should answer any questions you have about your local regulations. Fire extinguishers must be inspected and approved annually by an accredited fire safety equipment company.

- 3. Smoke Alarms** — According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) guidelines, new apartment buildings should have smoke detectors installed outside each bedroom, inside each bedroom and on each floor level of the building. In existing buildings, one smoke detector is required outside each grouping of bedrooms and on each level. Although the standards are not as strict for existing buildings, NFPA recommends adding a smoke detector inside each bedroom to meet the current standards. In accordance with the International Building Code and the NFPA, smoke detectors are required in all apartment buildings. Routine maintenance should be performed to affirm the reliability of smoke detectors.

Each detector includes manufacturer's recommendations for testing the device. Typically, the test button should be activated at least once per month and residents should be educated on the importance of conducting this test. Batteries should be changed annually at minimum or sooner if there is a "chirping" or other sound indicating the battery is weak. Batteries should never be removed without being immediately replaced, and the AC power source should never be disconnected on hard-wired detectors. Once or twice a year, smoke detectors should be vacuumed to remove dust and debris. As residents frequently will remove (often by force) a malfunctioning detector, any time an employee is in an apartment and a missing one is observed the situation should be quickly remedied (this speaks to situational awareness of potentially hazardous/liability risk). NFPA recommends replacing smoke detectors at least every 10 years, because studies have shown that failure rates of smoke detectors greatly increase after this period of time.

- 4. Carbon Monoxide Detectors** — Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless and colorless poisonous gas that can be lethal when inhaled for long periods of time. In recent years, carbon monoxide detectors have come into the spotlight as the primary solution to prevent CO-related deaths. A CO detector is just as essential as a smoke detector. Required areas of installation vary from state to state. Some states require a carbon monoxide detector on every floor, while some require them in every room. Properties with attached garages should post warnings on the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning and instructions for its prevention.
- 5. Fire Doors** — Fire doors require strict and compliant fire protection systems to ensure the safety of all residents. In the event of fire, high quality fire doors compartmentalize flames and smoke and direct residents to safety. Property managers and maintenance staff are required to ensure all doors on the property are not blocked and offer easy egress in the event of an emergency. Regular testing of automatic closers should occur. Fire doors should open in the direction of egress to prevent trapping in a fire emergency.
- 6. Grills and Other Cooking Devices** — As with other types of cooking devices, the leading causes of structural fires involving charcoal-fueled grills are unattended cooking and placing combustibles too close to heat. In structure fires, the items first ignited are most commonly the exterior trim and wall covering. Multifamily housing communities have special regulations concerning grills. Some state Fire Prevention Codes do leave room for alternatives to the traditional barbecue grill such as an electric grill. Generally, any cooking or heating device may not be used within 10 feet of a structure or under any balcony or overhang. Monthly exterior property inspections will assist with code compliance and taking action against any residents who willfully violate code. It is important to diligently inspect grills and other cooking devices and consistently enforce the rules.
- 7. Apartment Building Numbers** — In the event of an emergency, police and fire personnel must be able to respond immediately to any life-threatening situation. Address, building and apartment numbers must be clearly visible. Street address numbers should be plainly legible from the street fronting the property. Building numbers must be visible from the fire access road and are to be a contrasting color to the numbers' background and should be visible at night. Consider including directional signs on larger communities to make EMS response faster. Apartment numbers are also

required on each unit and are to be a contrasting color to the numbers' background. A regular inspection of the landscaping should reference visibility of this number as it is easy for trees and other foliage to obscure.

- 8. Fire Sprinklers** — Fire sprinkler systems are susceptible to various conditions that can damage their functions in the case of an emergency. Proactive fire sprinkler maintenance and repairs of these systems including valves and components are essential to its proper operation.

## **Related Links and Forms**

[NFPA Fact Sheet](#)

## About NAA

*The National Apartment Association (NAA) serves as the leading voice and preeminent resource through advocacy, education and collaboration on behalf of the rental housing industry. As a federation of more than 150 state and local affiliates, NAA encompasses over 82,000 members representing more than 10 million apartment homes globally. NAA believes that rental housing is a valuable partner in every community that emphasizes integrity, accountability, collaboration, community responsibility, inclusivity and innovation. NAA thanks its strategic partners Maintenance Supply Headquarters and Yardi. To learn more, visit [www.naahq.org](http://www.naahq.org).*