



ENSURING SAFETY AS BUILDINGS RE-OPEN TO A NEW NORMAL

With the U.S. federal government and many states beginning to allow businesses to reopen, building owners and facility managers will be getting ready to allow occupants back into structures that may have been relatively vacant for an extended period. While there are many common hazards to be addressed to ensure the safety of occupants as buildings of all types reopen, there will be some unique challenges for specific buildings based on their traditional usage, particularly as building owners and facility managers work to adhere to public health guidelines or otherwise modified provisions required in response to the pandemic.

While the NFPA [Fire and Life Safety Checklist for Reopening a Building](#) reviews factors that should be confirmed to ensure proper performance of fire protection and life safety systems prior to reopening any building, following are some guidelines for specific issues to be addressed for many buildings, including offices, restaurants, and retail stores, with particular attention to adjustments that might be needed for the physical configuration as well as the operational use.

GENERAL SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR REOPENING

Egress Management

Changes to how occupants typically enter and exit buildings as well as travel within them may need to be modified to avoid two-way flow encounters. Whether this is accomplished by using barriers or any other means, provisions need to be in place that allow occupants to access all exits and exit access during an emergency.

Queuing Lines

Designated queuing lines may need to be established to manage the number of occupants who come into the premises at one time. Provisions should be in place to ensure the use of all exits for customers in emergency conditions. Additionally, queuing lines of one store or building should not impede exit discharge of adjacent stores or buildings.

Occupant Flow

If one-way aisle pedestrian paths are established, appropriate signage should be in place to establish the desired flow. When using any type of fixed or semi-fixed barrier to manage directional flow, it should not obstruct or block means of egress within the building and that it allows for free dispersion of occupants after they leave the building under emergency conditions or circumstances.

Partition Placement

If partitions are added to provide increased separation between occupants, it needs to be verified that the materials meet flame spread index and smoke-developed ratings specified by the interior finish provision of [NFPA 101®](#), [Life Safety Code®](#). The impact of the partitions on the performance of smoke detection or automatic sprinkler systems must also be evaluated to ensure that their design and installation do not render the systems noncompliant and therefore ineffective.



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Hand Sanitizer Storage and Placement

Hand sanitizing stations will likely be provided in many buildings and, in most cases, administered through alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) dispensers. ABHRs and stored flammable liquid quantity must be verified to not exceed the limits allowed by codes and standards. In addition, the placement of ABHRs, whether free-standing or mounted, cannot restrict available egress paths. NFPA 101 should be specifically referenced to ensure proper use of ABHRs including their location, the dispenser characteristics, and distances between dispensers.

Automatic/Power-Operated Doors

Many facilities might consider the use of automatic hold-open devices on doors to limit the need for occupants to open doors with their hands. While many variations of this are permitted by NFPA 101, close attention needs to be paid to ensure that the design, function, and operations of such doors fully comply with code requirements.

Seating Arrangements

In order to maintain compliance with public health guidelines, many seating arrangements will need to be modified in order to provide adequate spacing between parties. While rearranging the seating, it is important that the reconfiguring of seats and tables does not obstruct or block needed egress paths, exits, or manual fire alarm pull stations.

Storage Management

If changes to operations require the storage of extra boxes, bags, or other materials, then those products need to be carefully managed to ensure the following:

- They do not block or obstruct egress, manual pull stations, or fire extinguishers;
- They are not stored too high to obstruct sprinklers; and
- They are not located too close to heat sources.

Additionally, if secondary exits are used for delivery drivers to come in and out of occupancies, for example in restaurants, adequate space must be maintained for occupants to freely egress in an emergency.



Learn More

As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, NFPA continues to provide key resources and information that address emergency planning, building, and fire and life safety issues. New resources are being added as the crisis evolves and challenges emerge. Visit [nfpa.org/coronavirus](https://www.nfpa.org/coronavirus) to access the latest resources.

