



# THIS WEEK IN TRAINING

## EVACUATING IN THE EVENT OF A FIRE ALARM ACTIVATION

It seems there is still some confusion as to whether or not a building **HAS** to be evacuated in the event that the fire alarm should activate for whatever reason. This week I'll try and clarify, for anyone who still doesn't understand, the NYS Fire Codes regarding this subject and the thinking behind why they're written the way they are...

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## EVACUATING IN THE EVENT OF A FIRE ALARM ACTIVATION

### Evacuation

Since as far back as we can remember, we have always been taught that when the fire alarm activates...you get out! Before we were old enough to go to school, our parents were teaching us this. Then we went to school and our teachers were teaching us this. Every year, the fire department would come, and they would teach us this. 6 times a school year the fire alarm would go off, the teacher got us up, we formed a line and evacuated as orderly as little kids could evacuate. All of that training, all of that burned into our brains and for some reason, as adults, people hear the fire alarm and they just sit there. Or, maybe one person will get up and investigate or even worse watch what everyone else is doing before they decide to make a move. That's if they actually *do* decide to make a move to evacuate at all. <https://youtu.be/zr3ZfeOSWZY>

### The Problem

Human behavior during a fire and or fire alarm activation has become fairly predictable with loads of research to back it up. Why don't people evacuate? Could it be *because* of all the training? Have we trained our brains to think when the fire alarm goes off it's nothing? Instead of it being second nature to leave, have we made it second nature to think it's a malfunction, drill or the most common reason it goes off, cooking? Maybe, or maybe it's just plain stupidity. A case can

## THE 3 SIDED SIZE UP

The reason the Engine pulls past the fire building on arrival is not just to leave the front open for the Truck. It's also so the officer can see and size-up three sides of the building before he steps out of the cab. This can help with determining whether or not to evacuate patrons during an A/A as well...ALWAYS do a size-up!

"Let No Mans Ghost Come Back To Say His Training Let Him Down"

be made for both. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mDjFtikLA>

In 2003, at Seton Hall University, 150 students were sent to the hospital, 6 were burned over 30% of their body, 3 over 60% over their bodies and three were killed in an arson fire in their freshman dorm (Fig.1).

In the weeks leading up to the fire, the alarm went off 13 times due to either malfunction, someone pulling a pull station maliciously or from cooking. Every person on the fire floor that was burned, delayed in evacuating, they thought it was another false alarm.

We've also been trained to be calm and orderly as we evacuate and believe it or not, society as a whole evacuates in a very calm manner...until they are hit with the first inhalation of smoke. That's when all bets are off. People have been known to push children out of the way to evacuate when confronted with smoke flames and or heat. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOzfq9Egxeo>



**Fig 1. Shawn Simons & Alvaro Llanos  
Seton Hall survivors**

But, when people actually see smoke, most don't react, unless they're alone. The difference between people in groups and people alone is astounding. If there is no leader, someone to say hey, we better go, the group does not react. This reaction is actually a form of panic, they freeze, not knowing what to do, it's not a natural reaction. What do we do about this kind of behavior? <https://youtu.be/9MJubwWo2Jw>

## The Code

The questions remain, do people *have to* evacuate during a fire alarm activation and is a manager/owner/proprietor of a business responsible for making everyone leave?

The answer is **NO** to **BOTH** questions. Is there an intelligent, moral and ethical obligation for an owner to evacuate their store? Sure, but the code is not concerned with that.

The way the state looks at it is you have been taught to evacuate when the fire alarm goes off since you were a child. It is every single person's own responsibility to evacuate when the fire alarm activates...period. Is this the right way to look at it? Given what we have learned and are still learning about human behavior in fires, the code probably needs to be changed. The National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) has made some changes through research of human behavior in NFPA 72 National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code however. They made changes to the decibel levels, different types of sirens and added audio voice messages of newly installed alarms and the code refers to this installation standard when installing a fire alarm. The problem is it doesn't address older alarms that are still out there, likely by the millions.

In defense of the code as far as an owner/proprietor/manager not evacuating a store is concerned, imagine this scenario. A 20 year old *kid*, who works his/her way up from fries to manager of a McDonald's and is making less money in dollars than they've been on this planet in years is going to be asked, at \$18 an hour to risk their life to make sure their store is evacuated when the fire alarm goes off, knowing full well that when the fire alarm goes off YOU'RE SUPPOSE TO LEAVE, is an insane thing to ask.

There is, however, a provision in the code that does make *someone* responsible for the evacuation of a building during a fire alarm activation. If the code official deems that a fire safety evacuation plan is necessary, someone in the plan if not multiple people will be asked to take on that responsibility. 450 Moreland Rd is one of these types of places and I wrote a plan for them a few weeks ago. If the plan is not followed, and the person on scene at the time of the event does not make sure the building is evacuated; they then are going against the NYS Fire Code and can be held accountable.

Another section of the [NYS Fire Code Section 401.3 Emergency forces notification](#) states, "In the event an unwanted fire occurs on a property, the owner or occupant shall immediately report such condition to the fire department. Building employees and tenants shall implement the appropriate emergency plans and procedures. No person shall, by verbal or written directive, require any delay in the reporting of a fire to the fire department." What that means is no one can stop someone from calling the fire department and this also is the reason behind not being allowed to cancel a fire alarm activation as well. NFPA 101 Fire Life and Safety Code states that no one shall impede the evacuation of a building during the course of a fire alarm activation. So although a manager of a store does not have to evacuate his/her store, if his/her employees and or customers want to leave, the manager cannot impede their evacuation. There are very obvious

problems with all of these situations and hopefully, although the state has been very tight lipped about the new codes, but hopefully, these are some of the things that will be addressed and changed.

## Conclusion

So ultimately, the building does not have to be evacuated by anyone unless there is a Fire Emergency Evacuation Plan, written and/or approved by a Code Official, in place. It is up to each person individually to evacuate when the fire alarm goes off...

That being said, when the fire alarm goes off, and you are the Incident Commander (IC) and you want the building evacuated, you have every right to evacuate the building. Should someone say no, were not evacuating, you can have them locked up by PD for failure to comply with your order.

I walked into Applebee's for a report of smoke coming from the walk-in box in the kitchen. I went in the front door and at least 40 people were having lunch. I said to the manager, you have to evacuate the store. He said "What do you mean? There's no fire." Rather than argue, I pulled the pull station I was standing next to. Nobody was going to sit there and eat lunch with that noise blasting in their ear. Was the call BS? Maybe, but did I know that at the time? No, we received a call for smoke in the building, it was black and white. But if it was an automatic alarm, would I have done the same thing? Probably not.

That situation was a little different in that the call was for a structure fire and the alarm hadn't sounded but, you get the picture. This also does not mean you have to evacuate every time you go to an automatic alarm somewhere either. There is no SOP somewhere, that I'm aware of, that says that, and nor should there be. Every situation is different. If you walk into Emilio's on a Saturday night at 8pm for an A/A and the manager greets you at the door and says sorry we opened up a hot pot and steam set off the photocell detector over the table in the dining room right here and points to the detector and you say, "I want everyone out of here now", there are going to be some unhappy customers and business owners, not good for PR...at all. But again, if you are the IC...it's your call.

Just remember, "It takes a lifetime to build a good and trusted reputation, but it only takes one bad decision to destroy it" and the Commack Fire Department has a pretty good reputation in this community. How many people have fought small fires in their own homes and businesses and delayed calling the fire department because they thought the fire

department would do more damage than the fire...breaking all the windows and cutting holes in their roofs, etc.?) We don't want this to ever be the case here.

The bottom line is, no one *has to* evacuate prior to your arrival unless you give the order when you get there...hopefully the new codes will address and change this, but for now, take each alarm as it comes, as the circumstances of each alarm are always different from the last...

**Thanks for reading**

**And**

**Have A Safe Week...**

Fire Marshal Digiose