

IT'S A FIRE!!

When a fire breaks out in an office setting, the first basic instinct is to panic and head for the nearest exit. “*Don't Panic*” is easy to say but crucial to survival. Many deaths do not result from the fire itself, but from being trampled as everyone scrambles to leave at once. Nobody expects an emergency or disaster, especially one that affects them, their employees, and their business. Yet the truth is that emergencies and disasters can strike at anytime and, unfortunately, safety generally does not become an issue until an accident occurs.

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), employers have a duty to protect their workers. Family members should not have to worry about whether their loved ones will safely return home. Safety should be a first consideration of employers and should not be an afterthought. Large and small businesses alike should have a plan to get their employees out of the building as quickly and safely as possible. Although safe evacuation of employees is integral to any fire safety plan, training your employees on what to do in the event of a fire is just as important.

Education is the key. Protect your workers by providing training. Post information throughout your building that will easily be remembered and likely to educate employees on how to react in the event of fire. Frequently recommended is the concept associated with R-A-C-E:

RESCUE: Rescue anyone in immediate danger if it is safe to do so. If time permits, check enclosed rooms, such as bathrooms, behind doors, storage rooms or any place where emergency lighting may not be readily seen and escape could be hindered.

ALARM: Activate the firm alarm and notify the employees by getting their attention. If you hear a fire alarm, react immediately. Do not wait to see what others are going to do. If an alarm sounds, you see smoke or fire, or other unusual disturbances, immediately exit the building in an orderly fashion, keeping in mind that it may not be the closest exit or the main exit.

CONTAIN: Contain the fire by closing all doors and windows.

EXTINGUISH: Extinguish the fire by using the proper fire fighting equipment, such as a fire extinguisher. Employees expected or anticipated to use fire extinguishers must be instructed on the hazards of fighting fire and how to properly operate the fire extinguisher. PASS is the generally accepted acronym associated with using a fire extinguisher: Pull, Aim, Squeeze and Sweep. Fixed extinguishers throughout the workplace are among the most reliable fire fighting tools. - Local fire departments are ready and willing to train anyone in the proper use of a fire extinguisher.

Depend on yourself for protection when you enter a building. Look for all available exits. Exits should be well lit and clearly marked. Some exits may be in front and some in back of you. Always be prepared to use the exit closest to you. You may not be able to use the main exit, especially if the lights go out or the hallway fills with smoke. All offices should post a schematic that outlines all doorways and building exits, alternative exits, and the location of fire extinguishers.

OSHA issues strict standards that require employers to provide proper exits, fire fighting equipment, emergency plans, and a fire suppression system which may include an automatic sprinkler system and employee training in the workplace. Employers are responsible for fire safety in a workplace and should be familiar with safety regulations to ensure that they are carried out.

The costs of a serious fire can be high, with –many businesses unable to reopen. Employers need to practice crisis management. Don't let a situation become a crisis. Be proactive. Have an evacuation plan and train employees. Don't let safety take a back seat.

Contributed by: Valerie Rist, Safety/Loss Control Specialist, West Virginia Board of Risk and Insurance Management