

FIREHOUSE®

Weekly Drill

DRILL #133: HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS

Introduction

High-rise buildings are being built more today than ever before. The cost of land has created an environment where building up is cost effective. Back in the day, high-rise buildings were found in urban settings and consisted of offices, hospitals, hotels, and residential occupancy. However, fire departments are starting to find more residential and hotel high rises being built in the suburbs.

If your jurisdiction has a high rise, is your fire safety bureau working with the occupants and educating them on proper fire prevention actions? If not, why not? We should not take it for granted that the occupants understand what will be required of them during an emergency. Several key issues that we should be educating them on are:

- Transmitting an alarm
- Alerting others
- Control building systems
- Avoid using elevators

Most of these buildings have some sort of alarm system – smoke detectors, sprinklers and pull stations – however, a large number of incidents are called in by someone in the building. In general, the fire department will be dispatched and be given vague information, like smoke on the ninth, 10th, and 11th floors. We can help educate them to be more specific as to the fire floor. This location is going to assist in deploying our resources.

When it comes to alerting others, this can be challenging. One thing we don't want to do is impose panic. Education sessions with occupants as to the actions they should take during an emergency are very helpful. Zoning of the building is another tool that can be used to alert occupants in the immediate area of the emergency. Use of the public address system to communicate to occupants is a great tool.

Fire personnel operating in a high rise will find it important to gain control of the building systems. Heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems should be shut down early in the operations. Assign a firefighter to the communications system if the building is equipped with one. All important information can be communicated to the occupants from this point.



Elevators are nice to have in high-rise buildings, but they do have their downfalls. One downfall is that occupants want to use them to get to the lobby; taking the stairs is the last thing they think about. Think about it; every time they go to leave the building, they walk to the elevator and push the button to go down. It's a repetitive kind of training they get every day that becomes second nature during an emergency.

Firefighters need to capture the elevators upon arrival. In general, once an alarm is activated in a high-rise building all elevators should go into fire mode automatically, bringing them to the lobby floor. Older elevators may need to have this fire mode manually activated by the fire department. This is why it is important to know your elevators.

Training with residents on elevator operations that should be used during an emergency is advised. Many don't really read the notices posted at the elevator during the emergency; even though they have read it a hundred times.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick