

FIREHOUSE®

Weekly Drill

DRILL #142: PUBLIC ASSEMBLY

Introduction

Fires do have a tendency to occur in places of public assembly. There are many that come to mind, the most famous is the Cocoanut Grove fire in Boston, on Nov. 28, 1942, which was said to be the deadliest nightclub fire in history at the time.

In addition to nightclubs, other public assemblies that we need to be concerned with are dance halls, lecture halls, cabarets, hotel ballrooms and after-school activities in gymnasiums. One area of our duties as a fire service is to make sure these type establishments are inspected on a regular basis during operational hours for overcrowding. During this inspection, emergency exits should be checked for code compliance.

Should a fire occur in one of these public assemblies, the procedure should include an aggressive evacuation of occupants. As the first-due officer, you must see to it that all exits are opened immediately, and if need be place a hose-line to protect those exiting. Once a truck company arrives, ventilation of the fire area within the building will need to commence to facilitate the extinguishment of the fire.

Dance halls and after-school activities should concern us, as many times these places of assembly like to hang decorations to create a more festive atmosphere. Most of the time the sponsors of these event are not aware of the local fire codes, as many forbid this type of decorating. Should a fire take place, these decorations can assist in the spread of fire.

However, the number one concern at these incidents is that of panic by the occupants. The incident commander will need to ensure that there is enough equipment and manpower on scene to address assistance in evacuating patrons. A search and rescue of the building will require manpower and coordination. Searches of the restrooms along with other portions of the building will have to be undertaken. We have to be concerned with overcrowding, especially in nightclubs. Keep in mind that several nightclubs have been located in the basement of buildings, increasing the overall hazards present.

High life hazards are the number one concern as mentioned. It might be necessary for firefighters to hold the fires in check until all life-saving operations have been completed.



Many hotels have multiple ballrooms and evacuation will have to not only take in each of the ballrooms, but might also incorporate evacuation of the hotel rooms as well.

Hotel ballrooms often are located on different levels and generally will not have a designated evacuation route for each of them. Much the same as the nightclubs, decorations are usually placed in these ballrooms for the events they are hosting. Setting arrangements can and often do impede the exiting of occupants. Ventilation in these ballrooms will be challenging to say the least.

Ballrooms on the upper floors pose even more obstacles for the incident commander and firefighters alike. Firefighters will have to operate using standpipe connections. This will require having sufficient hose to operate on the fire floor to get to the fire area. Depending on the floor, aerial devices may help in the evacuation of occupants.

During department drills and inspections, a pre-plan for how to operate in these type of public assemblies should be undertaken. As always, pre-plans can and do save time and assist in saving lives during such incidents.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick