



Fire Marshal's

COMMUNIQUÉ

du commissaire des incendies

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TO GO OR TO STAY?

FIRE EMERGENCY PROCEDURES FOR MULTI-UNIT RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS (LOWRISE AND HIGHRISE) *(External Distribution)*

The fatal fire at 2 Forest Laneway in January 1995 generated much debate regarding the proper action that should be taken by occupants of multi-unit residential buildings if a fire occurs. In many cases, individuals and authorities have taken a very strong position, based on their personal experience, that occupants should either "go" or "stay". This Communiqué is intended to provide information relevant to both sides of the debate and to assist the fire service in adopting a uniform procedure throughout the province. Shortly after the fire, the Office of the Fire Marshal (OFM) established a task group to develop the most appropriate fire emergency procedures for residential buildings. The task group included representatives from the fire service, government agencies and other associations and organizations. Following an extensive review of residential fires from a number of jurisdictions and consideration of all the factors, the task group agreed on uniform fire emergency procedures which were subsequently published in the pamphlet, **Fire In Your Apartment Building**. The pamphlet was distributed to the fire service with **Communiqué #95-014**, dated May 15, 1995.

In addition to the above, the OFM consulted with authorities across Canada and internationally. The procedures contained in the pamphlet are generally consistent with those adopted by other jurisdictions. At the annual meeting of the Canadian Council of Fire Marshals and Fire Commissioners (CCFM/FC), which was held in St. John's Newfoundland on July 14-19, 1996, the following motion on evacuation procedures for high-rise buildings was passed unanimously: "... that the CCFM/FC support the position taken by the

Office of the Fire Marshal (Ontario) on the issue of *Stay or Go*". Further, a recommendation was made to advertise the position of the CCFM/FC on this matter to and through other appropriate organizations.

Generally, it is safer for occupants to be outside a building during a fire emergency rather than inside. Modern high-rise buildings are constructed with non-combustible materials and provide a relatively high level of fire safety. However, severe and prolonged fire conditions as well as other unusual factors may disable some of the fire safety features in the building. In addition, some older high-rise buildings may contain combustible construction and others may not be equipped with modern fire safety systems. Therefore, occupants who remain in their suite for a long period of time may be at a high risk. In addition, fire departments may have difficulty carrying out both fire suppression activities and rescue to a large number of occupants if resources are limited.

Some of these concerns were illustrated in a recent high-rise residential building fire in Chicago. The fire started in a suite on the 5th floor, spread to a suite across the corridor and then spread to the 6th floor via the outside of the building before being controlled by the fire department. Two fatalities occurred in the suite across the corridor and a third in the 6th floor corridor. Additionally, one resident jumped to her death to escape the fire. Approximately 80 occupants were rescued from the building by fire department aerial ladders. Total resources for the rescue involved 21 engine companies, 10 truck companies, one squad, 5 battalion chiefs and 16 ambulances. Such resources are not available in many Ontario jurisdictions. Most fires are quickly contained by the fire department and whether occupants evacuate or not does not have a significant impact on life safety. Under more severe fire conditions, however, occupants only have a narrow "window of opportunity" in which to evacuate safely. Once this opportunity passes, occupants are committed to remain in the building until the fire emergency passes or until they are rescued. **For these reasons, all occupants who are able should begin evacuation procedures immediately upon hearing the alarm. If this is not possible, they should initiate "protect in place" procedures. The special door stickers, [If You Hear The Fire Alarm And Cannot Leave Your Apartment](#), should be used to remind occupants of the most effective procedures to use during a fire emergency.**

As the circumstances surrounding each fire differ, occupants must make a "go or stay" decision based upon the conditions at the time of the fire alarm. To make an informed decision, they must have all the necessary information. Attached to this Communiqué is information which is intended to assist occupants in the decision process. Please make this material available to residents in your community. Also, encourage building management to distribute this material and other fire safety information to all tenants regularly. This practice can be adopted through the fire safety plan.

To reinforce appropriate fire emergency procedures, the inquest into the Forest Laneway fire also included a recommendation for special signs to be posted in various locations throughout residential buildings. The

OFM has developed recommended signs that can be used for this purpose. Samples of the signs are attached to this Communiqué. Sign No. 1 is intended to be installed throughout the exit stairs to remind occupants that there is no exit at the roof. Sign No. 2 can be used inside the stair where it continues below the exit level. Sign No. 3 can be used at strategic locations in the corridor and exit stairs. Please encourage building management to adopt these signs or similar messages in all multi-unit residential buildings as part of the fire safety plan. In addition, building management should be encouraged to post emergency procedures in key areas such as the main lobby, laundry rooms, elevators and other locations frequently used by the building occupants. This will expand opportunities for everyone to become familiar with the information.

The OFM is continuing to gather information on fire emergency procedures from various jurisdictions around the world. The fire service will be provided with any relevant information as it becomes available.

Print these instructions out and stick them on your door.

IF YOU HEAR THE FIRE ALARM AND CANNOT LEAVE YOUR APARTMENT

You must protect yourself from smoke. Stay in your apartment until you are rescued or until you are told to leave. This may take a long time.

Do not try to leave your apartment a long time after the alarm has sounded. The longer you wait, the more risk there is that heavy smoke will have spread into the stairways and corridors. Your chances of survival are less.

- Keep smoke from entering your apartment. Use duct tape to seal cracks around the door and place wet towels at the bottom. Seal vents or air ducts the same way
- If smoke still enters your apartment, telephone the fire department, tell them where you are and move to the balcony. Close the doors behind you.
- If you don't have a balcony, go to the most smoke-free room, close the door and seal it with tape and towels. Open the window for fresh air.
- Show your rescuers where you are by hanging a sheet from the window or balcony.
- Keep low to the floor where the air is cleaner
- Listen for instructions from authorities.

REMEMBER, FIRE SAFETY BEGINS WITH YOU.

Find out about fire safety in your building. For more information to help you survive a fire, ask your building management or your fire department.

