

CAI sits down with Jason Reid of National Life Safety Group as we touch on the Property Management of “Life Safety System Failures”

In managing a Condominium, what exactly is a fire watch?

A fire watch can be defined as a “a temporary action” and or “surveillance measure” for the purposes of ensuring the fire-safety of a building, in the event of any act or situation which creates an increased risk to persons or property. The failure of an installed life safety system requires “Alternative Measures” to be taken by the building owner.

The term “fire watch” is also used to describe a dedicated person or persons whose sole responsibility is to look for fires and other hazards within a building. The purpose of a fire watch is provide temporary surveillance in a building, for the purposes of identifying and controlling fire hazards, detecting signs of fire, initiating alarms or occupant emergency notification, notifying the fire department and implementing any special procedures based on the type of fire watch. It is almost as if the person(s) assigned as the fire watch, is replacing, or adding to, both the building’s detection and notification systems in your building.

If a Life Safety System in our building is being repaired, do I need to implement a “fire watch” as the Building Manager?

Yes. The building owner has numerous responsibilities as specified in the Fire Code and must ensure that measures in the building’s approved Fire Safety Plan are implemented. One of these measures that Owners are responsible for is the maintenance of a “Fire Watch” Program. In other words, the person in charge of the building must implement “Alternative Measures” when required, and these measures or procedures, are typically outlined in your building’s approved Fire Safety Plan. These are pre-approved actions to take in the event that any life safety device or system fails or is “not in full operational service” in the building.

Is failing to implement “Alternative Measures” during life safety system impairments a fire code violation?

Yes it is. In the event a fire alarm system, sprinkler system, standpipe system, or the building’s fire pump or firefighter elevator becomes inoperative (or others) – no matter the reason, the Alternative Measures, found within your building’s fire safety plan, must be implemented by the building Owner in response to that impairment.

These measures often require a fire watch, and / or resident / fire department notifications. Failing to do so can not only put residents at risk, it can place arriving firefighters at risk, as they expect functioning and maintained fire alarm / sprinkler systems when they arrive at the building. Not following these procedures can result in costly fines to the building Owner for non compliance.

How do you determine how many staff are needed for the fire watch?

In general, a fire watch is to be used only as a temporary means to provide either an extra level of safety (in the case of a special event or hot work operation) or to supplant an out of service or impaired life safety system. A fire watch cannot be used as a technique to avoid or delay the installation or repair of a life safety system.

In order to dive a tad deeper into the topic, let’s use Sprinkler impairment for example. The building is undergoing renovations that require a certain section of the building to be without sprinkler coverage. The “Fire Watch”, must patrol the entire area of impairment, every 30 – 60 minutes. If you have a large area, and that one individual cannot achieve the fire watch patrol of the entire area under impairment within that time, then additional staff may be needed to perform the fire watch. Fire Watch patrols are required to be documented in detail, at intervals depending on the hazard and impairment, or at the minimum – every 30 – 60

minutes. Always follow your building's specific procedures for Alternative Measures and / or Fire Watch programs.

Typically, this documentation must be maintained by the building Owner dating back a period of two years. This documentation can be requested by any Fire Prevention Officer, as the Fire Codes place the emphasis on the building Owner required to maintain proof of compliance.

Another example may require a specific fire watch for some HOTWORK being carried out on the roof. In this case, a trained person, armed with the proper Fire Watch equipment, would both inspect and monitor the work area, for 15 minutes prior to the work being carried out, the entire work process, and perhaps monitor the work area for 30 minutes after the work was completed. This type of fire watch is done based on the increased risk to persons or property based on the type of HOTWORK being completed and conditions at the site. Fire Watch equipment may include any of the following; Fire Extinguisher, cellular phone, Blow Horn, Emergency Contact list, fire blankets, and first aid kits.

Do I have to inform the residents or occupants of a building that a life safety system has been impaired?

Yes, the building Owner is required always to communicate life safety system impairments to the occupants. Occupants are instructed in advance of emergencies of their fire and emergency procedures, and how to respond to fire alarms. Residents often make decisions based on many factors, one of them being the fire protection equipment inside the building.

If the status of those systems change – they have a right to know as it directly impacts their decisions to be made during fire emergencies. With a resident knowing a system is impaired, that will allow that resident to make an informed decision, always knowing the status of the life safety systems. Occupant communication can be achieved several different ways, depending on the nature of impairment and the type of occupancy.

If a life safety system impairment also impacts the resident suites, residents must also be notified in advance so that they too can be an extension of the fire watch within their own suites, and understand any special procedures needed during the fire watch.

What's the industry best practice in keeping a building fire code compliant?

Hire a professional building manager. These are the dedicated industry leaders that manage our vertical communities across Canada. The property management team at your building includes, superintendents, concierge staff and cleaners, all with a common objective to keeping occupants safe. In fact, they complete checks and inspections every single day, every 7 days, and every 30 days to meet the fire and safety codes on behalf of the building owner. Over the last 10 years I have had the privilege of supporting some Canada's most iconic buildings - commercial and residential, and work alongside some seriously talented managers in supporting them in "proving" their compliance, as required by the code.

Jason Reid is Senior Advisor, National Life Safety Group, and a sought-after industry speaker recognized by his peers for his passionate delivery of critical lessons learned and free sharing of best practices. Jason can be reached at www.nationallifesafetygroup.ca