



Toolbox Talk: Exit Route Requirements Including Decorations and Storage

Introduction/Overview:

One of the easiest ways to help ensure safety in the workplace and at home is to keep all walkways and emergency exits clear and free of obstructions. Unfortunately, it is not hard to find catastrophic examples with loss of life due to blocked emergency exits. It is not uncommon to find emergency exits either locked or blocked from the outside during safety inspections. Even holiday decorations have been found to block or hide emergency exits.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and Virginia Occupational Safety and Health (VOSH) enforce standards relating to emergency exits. These standards are found in [29 CFR 1910 Subpart E](#), Exit Routes, Emergency Action Plans, and Fire Prevention Plans.

All employees should be familiar with these standards and do their part in ensuring these standards are followed. In addition, all employees have a vested interest in doing their part to ensure they can immediately evacuate in the event of an emergency. Their lives may depend on it.

Statistics:

Many examples of multiple deaths have occurred because of blocked exits or not enough exits to handle the number of people attempting to evacuate.

Two recent examples include the [Happy Land Social Club](#) fire in 1990, where 87 people died. This illegal nightclub had been ordered closed 16 months before the fire for various code violations. An arsonist started a gasoline fire at the only entry and exit, effectively preventing other patrons from leaving.

Another example occurred at [The Station in 2003](#), where 100 people died, and over 230 people were injured. Again, in this case, a major contributing factor involved the exits; three exits existed, but the panic caused most patrons to attempt to escape through one single-door exit. Many died in a crowd crush just inside the main doors.

Developed by:

Talking Points:

All employees should know the requirements of the standard. All employees should also be encouraged to be on the lookout and have the authority to clear blocked exits. However, this does not alleviate the employer's responsibility to conduct frequent safety inspections, including all emergency exits.

Below is a list of items that should be considered when inspecting emergency exits.

- The exit route must be permanent.
- If your agency must keep exits locked (prisons and mental institutions), the employer must ensure that the doors can be opened in a reasonable amount of time around the clock.
- The ability to open these exits must be tested periodically.
- If your agency is not exempted, then the emergency doors should have a panic bar or other device that allows the exit to be opened from the inside.
- Ensure the exits are not blocked on the outside (trash dumpsters, vehicles).
- Ensure all exit signs are in the proper working order and being inspected and tested.
- Ensure all exit signs can be followed.
- Ensure any door that could be mistaken for an emergency exit has signage that states the door is not an exit (bathrooms, closets, classrooms).
- Ensure an evacuation plan is posted where it can be clearly seen and indicates your location.
- Ensure all exits lead to a safe area away from the emergency.
- Ensure the exit path does not travel past flammable or chemical storage.
- Generally, a minimum of two exits are required, but one or more exits may be required depending on the number of employees, the size, and the number of floors.
- The exit route has to be seven feet and six inches high with a minimum width of 28 inches, but the width must handle the number of employees who would be evacuating.
- If the outside exit route has a fall hazard, then guardrails must be installed.
- The outdoor exit route must be covered if the possibility of snow and ice may be present.
- The outdoor exit route must be reasonably straight and smooth.

Additional Discussion Notes:

Final Thoughts: Remember, you should instill that all exit routes remain clear of obstructions in your employees. This will ensure that your employees will have an unimpeded exit to the assigned assembly area, thereby significantly increasing their ability to survive in an emergency.

NOTE: Always promote discussion with the attendees. If no one in attendance can answer a question, don't hesitate to contact your Office of Workers' Compensation (OWC) or the Loss Control Innovations (LCI) consultants for assistance.

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References:

Recent fires that resulted in multiple fatalities.

<https://www.firerescue1.com/fatal-fires/articles/30-years-later-reflecting-on-the-happy-land-social-club-fire-and-similar-incidents-o4qdT2ZGt97QnWIT/>



<https://www.firefighternation.com/prevention/learning-from-the-station-nightclub-fire/>



Exit requirements

<https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standardnumber/1910/1910.36>

