

# TOOLBOX TALKS

## *FIRE PREVENTION FOR SMALL BUSINESSES FACTSHEET*

A fire can have a devastating impact on small businesses, some which are home-based. A fire can race through a structure/business in a matter of minutes, giving the employer and employees little time to escape. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1910.39 requires an employer with 10 or more employees to have a fire prevention plan.

A fire prevention plan for businesses with 10 or more employees must be:

- in writing;
- kept in the workplace; and
- available for employees to review.

The following minimum elements must be included in a fire prevention plan:

- list of all major fire hazards;
- proper handling and storage procedures for hazardous materials;
- potential ignition sources and their control;
- type of fire protection equipment necessary to control each major hazard;
- procedures to control accumulations of flammable and combustible waste materials;
- procedures for regular maintenance of safeguards installed on heat-producing equipment to prevent the accidental ignition of combustible materials;
- name or job title of employees responsible for maintaining equipment to prevent or control sources of ignition or fires; and
- name or job title of employees responsible for the control of fuel source hazards.



For a home-based business, a working smoke alarm is essential. Smoke alarms should be installed on every level of a building, including the basement, on ceilings or high on walls. They should be tested once a month, according to manufacturer's instructions. Batteries should be replaced once a year or as soon as the smoke alarm "chirps," indicating the battery is low. Smoke alarms should be replaced every 10 years, even those that are hard-wired, or "long life," 10-year battery-types. A qualified electrician should install hard-wired fire alarms.

For small businesses based outside the home, contact the local fire department to determine the fire alarm requirements for the building. In addition to maintaining smoke alarms or smoke detectors, it is essential that businesses develop and practice a basic fire evacuation plan so employees know what to do when an alarm sounds. Employers should involve as many people as practical in putting together the plan, including disabled employees. As part of the plan, have employees:

- study posted evacuation plans;
- learn two ways out of each work area;
- count the number of desks or work stations between their work area and the nearest two exits;
- designate an outside meeting place where everyone can gather after they've evacuated, and devise a system to account for everyone in the building; and
- practice the evacuation plan at least twice a year.



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If the emergency plan includes the use of portable fire extinguishers, employers must keep in mind that a properly maintained portable fire extinguisher can quickly put out a small fire or control a larger one until the fire department arrives. But the number one priority should be for everyone to evacuate safely and call the fire department. Employees appointed to use a fire extinguisher must become familiar with its operation before a fire breaks out. They should only operate the fire extinguisher if they have an unobstructed escape route and are comfortable handling the situation. They should begin discharging the extinguisher six to eight feet away from the fire and move closer as the fire diminishes. To operate a fire extinguisher, a person should remember the word PASS:

Holding the extinguisher with the nozzle pointing away from them:

- pull the pin;
- aim low, point the extinguisher at the base of the fire;
- squeeze the lever; and
- sweep the nozzle from side-to-side.

To prevent a possible fire small businesses should:

- avoid storing or stockpiling flammable materials such as packaging materials or waste where they could be accessed by the public, including areas immediately outside the business premises;
- make sure all machinery is serviced as recommended by manufacturers and is kept clean;
- if possible, switch machinery off when the business is unattended; and
- secure all doors, windows or other access points when the business is unattended and make sure the business has adequate lighting to deter trespassers

The employer should ensure that the business has an adequately serviced and functional fire alarm system that is suitable to the small business e.g.: remote serviced alarm systems, sprinkler systems, and thermal or smoke alarms etc.

If the small business stores dangerous goods, ensure their storage and use adheres to federal, state and local requirements.

The employer should know what information is important for their business continuity. This should include having contingency plans to protect and/or restore all-important information (hard copy & electronically) like supplier and client lists, business contracts and insurance details. Consider having an off-site secure location to store important information in the contingency plan.

If a property has a properly installed and maintained automatic fire sprinkler system, the chances of dying in a fire and the average property loss per fire are both cut by one-half to two-thirds, compared to properties that don't have sprinklers.

Remember to practice safety. Don't learn it by accident.

This guide was published with information from the Department, and the Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Safety Violations.



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