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Balancing Fire, Tornado and Lock-Down Safety Drills in Schools

With the implementation of Public Act 12 of 2014, the Bureau of Fire Services is providing clarification regarding the requirements for maintaining measures of fire safety, tornado safety, and safety from unwanted intruders. The new Act requires K-12 schools to perform at least five (5) fire safety drills, two (2) tornado safety drills, and three (3) lock-down emergency drills.

During a fire, the corridor system acts as a vital component in getting students and staff safely and quickly out of the building. Doors that open into the corridor are required to be positive latching. Positive latching keeps the door closed if there is a fire in the room and protects the corridor from smoke. Placing magnets or other devices that circumvent the positive latching of the corridor doors is prohibited and violates the Michigan School Fire Safety Rules.

To remain proactive regarding tornado preparedness, school officials should work in conjunction with local emergency management coordinators to develop a tornado response plan that outlines the actions that should be taken after tornado sirens have been activated. The plan should include designated tornado shelter areas and a system for monitoring and evaluating tornado shelter drills. School officials must conduct tornado shelter drills in accordance with Michigan Law and all drills must include staff and student participation, an audible signal independent of the school fire alarm, and a plan of movement to shelter areas.

Many schools have already increased security using a layered defense plan to prevent unwanted intruders from gaining access to school facilities. Some of the key elements put into place include distributing emergency preparedness procedures, providing a secured vestibule at the main entrance, and eliminating exterior door handles on many non-entrance doors.

Lock-down drills are required for all K-12 schools and teach students and staff how to locate a safe area within the school in which to barricade in place until the incident is over. In order to maintain a safe classroom, schools have been locking their doors and exploring the use of devices to barricade the classroom door. Barricade devices are permissible and are put in place by a teacher or other school staff member during lock-down drills or actual emergencies. These devices are not affixed to the classroom door and do not violate normal door hardware or the Michigan Schools Fire Safety rules.

Following a lock-down, the barricade device is removed and the door returns to normal use.

Maintaining partial lock-down conditions during normal school hours remains a concern for many districts. Keeping classroom doors locked at all times have proven inconvenient for teachers and students and has led to some schools overriding the positive latching requirement of the door by installing or using devices that keep the door from latching. As noted above, these devices are prohibited and violate the Michigan School Fire Safety Rules. Door locks, if provided, shall not require the use of a key, tool, special knowledge or more than one motion to open from the egress side.

For more information, please go to the Bureau of Fire Services website at www.michigan.gov/bfs.