

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

METROPOLITAN FIRE CHIEFS ASSOCIATION



Joint Statement Regarding

SINGLE STAIRWAYS IN MULTIFAMILY BUILDINGS

The International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association (Metro Chiefs) have joined forces to notify our members and the general public of efforts in some jurisdictions to reduce the number of required exit stairwells and permit a single means of egress in multifamily buildings up to six stories. Current model code requires at least two means of egress in residential occupancies above three stories. These legislative actions are an attempt to supersede the model safety codes, placing occupants and fire fighters at greater risk of injury and death. We must do all we can to defeat these misguided efforts.

Allowing residential structures to be built with exemptions or modifications contrary to decades of research and investigation will jeopardize safety. Put simply, lives will be endangered.

History is filled with examples of incidents where a single means of egress and blocked egress resulted in trapped occupants and loss of life. More concerning is that some state, provincial, and local legislatures are considering reducing established critical life-saving features by circumventing the national code development consensus process. The national code development process ensures equal, non-biased dialogue between all stakeholders to find consensus. Circumventing the code development process jeopardizes the public, building occupants, and first responders.

Much like smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms, proper exiting is known to have saved thousands of lives and remains the fundamental building block to life safety. Layered fire prevention measures encompassing multiple means of egress, fire suppression systems, fire-rated construction, automatic fire alarm systems, compartmentalization, and many other codes provide a reasonable, widely accepted, and nationally developed level of protection. Drastic changes, such as those proposed in some jurisdictions, directly contrast with time-tested safety fundamentals.

Model codes and standards are minimum safety requirements established to address identified hazards, including fires, explosions, hazardous materials incidents, natural disasters, and other dangerous events.

In opposing this effort, the IAFF and the Metro Chiefs recognize the following:

1. Single means of egress places residents and fire fighters in danger;
2. Many fire departments lack the personnel and equipment required to combat these types of fires and to safely evacuate large numbers of people from elevated floors through a single means of egress;
3. Operations on ground or aerial ladders are hazardous for trained fire fighters. Removing occupants via ground or aerial devices places them at a greater risk of falls or being struck by debris from the fire scene, particularly individuals who may have mobility issues, disabilities, or other vulnerabilities;
4. Providing emergency responders access to only a single entryway for emergency operations negatively impacts rescue and fire suppression efforts, especially if the single exit is obstructed by occupants attempting to evacuate the structure. This removes the responder's ability to utilize one stairwell for occupant egress and establish suppression operations in the second stairwell;
5. Many of these proposed multifamily dwellings serve our most vulnerable populations and place them at greater risk by degrading the standard of living and life safety;
6. Nationally developed consensus model codes and standards are promulgated based on real data from past tragedies, including fire deaths, injuries, and large dollar losses. In addition, modern fire science and technologies are used to create layered protection in buildings, ensuring and enhancing safety. To comply with portions of the code and promote the elimination of other parts will have devastating consequences;

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The IAFF and IAFC Metro Chiefs demand that state legislatures decline efforts to circumvent the model code process and that established egress requirements be maintained.

While the stated intent of a single-stair exit may simplify the building design, it's essential to consider the loss of known life safety requirements. Existing proposals in some states have incorporated additional safety requirements for multi-story buildings when a single exit is allowed. However, when an exit is an exterior stairway, these safety measures are either impossible to achieve or expressly exempt. Despite proposed tradeoffs, many buildings in those areas feature exterior stairways, and the proposed safety provisions have not been incorporated. This raises questions about the true intent behind these safety alternatives – whether they genuinely prioritize fire fighter and occupant safety or merely serve as a convenient workaround.

We strongly oppose any changes that lower the minimum safety requirements found in the national consensus model codes and standards.

We implore all stakeholders to continue to collaborate and find workable solutions that maintain fire and life safety as the highest priority.