

BUILDING FIRE PROTECTION IN THE REAL WORLD: THE RELIABILITY OF PASSIVE FIRE PROTECTION

By Richard Schulte

Since 2005, the reliability of sprinkler protection has been the subject of much debate in the fire protection field, however, it seems that the reliability of passive fire protection is rarely questioned. If the reliability of sprinkler protection is an issue, then it would seem reasonable that the reliability of passive fire protection should also be questioned.

A 3 story hotel located off I-64 just east of Louisville, Kentucky was constructed about 15 years ago and was refurbished roughly 2 years ago. The hotel is protected by a sprinkler system, provided with a manual fire alarm system and the corridors are separated from the guest rooms by fire-rated corridor walls with door openings protected by 20 minutes fire door assemblies with self-closers. The second and third floors of the hotel are served by three enclosed exit stairs. Just a few days ago, it was noted (by the author) that seven of the nine doors which provide access to the enclosed stairs in this building were blocked in the open position with wedges.

It is simply not enough for code enforcement authorities to require compliance with building code requirements. In order for the level of fire safety mandated by the building code to actually be achieved, the fire protection and fire safety equipment provided must be maintained.

Typically, two separate governmental departments are responsible for code compliance in the United States. The building department enforces building code requirements for new building construction, while fire departments are tasked with the responsibility for enforcing the maintenance provisions contained in the fire (prevention) code. Regardless of how good of a job the building department does in enforcing the building code, if the fire department does not enforce the maintenance provisions contained in the fire code, the level of fire safety mandated by the codes will not be provided.

Fire departments in the United States need to start doing a better job of enforcing the maintenance provisions contained in the fire (prevention) code.

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