



DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
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BULLETIN: 2008-1

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SUBJECT: School Lockdowns

REFERENCE: F703.4 Evacuations

In July, 2007 the Attorney General issued a directive to all local law enforcement agencies through the county prosecutor's offices regarding school lockdowns. Unfortunately, this directive did not address fire alarm activations or the discovery of a fire during a school lockdown.

The AG's directive mandates that each law enforcement agency develop policies for addressing various types of school lockdowns. As such, each school must comply with these mandates and develop plans that address these situations.

A significant concern regarding school lockdowns is the activation of the fire alarm system as well as the discovery of an actual fire during the lockdown. From the law enforcement perspective fire alarm activations are often used by perpetrators to force the occupants into a vulnerable position where harm can be inflicted. Additionally, law enforcement cannot communicate effectively over the sound of an activated system. From the fire service perspective it is necessary to immediately evacuate a school upon the activation of the fire alarm system. The commonality of these seemingly conflicting positions is the safety of the children and occupants of the school.

We understand that law enforcement and school officials have already established, or are in the process of establishing policies to comply with this directive. A significant piece of the policy should address fire alarm activations, the silencing of the system during school lockdowns, as well as when the occupants should or should not evacuate for a fire alarm activation during a school lockdown situation. It is imperative that the fire official and fire suppression forces be part of this process and understand the issues facing law enforcement during a lockdown incident. These policies should be specific as to the actions and responsibilities of the school, law enforcement and the fire service during school lockdowns.

Therefore, the Division is directing all local enforcing agencies to allow for a written school lockdown policy that establishes criteria for the silencing of the fire alarm system and addresses evacuation or the sheltering in place of occupants during a school lockdown. This policy should also address the activation of the fire alarm system and/or the subsequent discovery of a fire during a lockdown. It must include a mechanism that establishes a unified command during such incidents and address representation from the fire service within that unified command structure during these types of emergencies. The Division is in the process of developing model policies to assist local officials to develop their own policy.

If a written policy does not exist, or if the fire official has not been part of the development and approval of a policy that does exist, the failure to evacuate during a fire alarm activation or the silencing of the fire alarm system, even under a school lockdown situation, should be viewed as a violation of the Fire Prevention Code (F-504.1 and F-703.4).

This Bulletin will remain in affect until replaced by a formal amendment to the Fire Prevention Code that addresses school lockdown situations.