

District of Columbia Fire & EMS Department  
 Code Enforcement Information Bulletin  
**Fire Watch Implementation Procedures**



## I. SCOPE

This bulletin shall apply all buildings in the District of Columbia with the exception of Federal enclaves.

## II. PURPOSE

To establish standard guidelines for implementation of a fire watch and to ensure the property owners and the public receives accurate and helpful information regarding responsibilities for fire watch requirements in buildings.

## III. DEFINITIONS

**Fire Watch:** A fire watch is a short-term, emergency measure intended to provide an acceptable level of life safety when an unsafe or hazardous condition exists in a building or structure. A fire watch is only a compensatory measure. It is intended to allow continued occupancy of a building or facility that may not be safe to be occupied during the time period required for implementing appropriate changes or repairs. The purpose of the fire watch is to check ALL areas of the building on a regular basis to detect fire/life safety emergencies as well as provide prompt notification to 911 and emergency responders should an emergency arise. During an emergency, building occupants must be notified of the appropriate action to be taken by fire watch personnel.

**Out of Service:** A system is considered out of service if it is impaired to the point of being non-operational, and not capable of providing the protection the system was designed to provide.

**Unoccupied Building:** A building that has been evacuated under willful actions and will remain without any occupants within the building

## IV. POLICY

The authority for this requirement can be found in Title 12H DCMR DC Construction Code Supplement of 2013 and the 2012 Edition of the International Code Council (ICC) International Fire Code and International Building Code.

### **Required:**

A fire watch is required to be implemented immediately when certain conditions are discovered, either by the facility manager or by the Fire Marshal and his/her representatives. Examples of when a fire watch will be required by the DC Fire and EMS Department, Office of the Fire Marshal includes, but is not limited to:

- Outages for maintenance that will exceed four (4) hours, significant impairment of, or out of service fire alarm system.

- Outages for maintenance that will exceed four (4) hours, significant impairment of, or out of service fire suppression system.
- Blocked or locked means of egress and /or exit.
- Hazardous or dangerous conditions that create an immediate life hazard. ( This condition shall require notification to 911)

Different occupancies have different levels of risk which are determined by the relative vulnerability of the occupants. It is not appropriate to treat all occupancies the same, therefore each situation shall be evaluated individually and the above examples are not prescriptive. Outages for maintenance shall be reviewed for the length of time involved to perform the work.

## V. Procedures:

The fire watch, whether ordered by the Fire Marshal, or requested by the building owner or their representative, shall be contained in a detailed written plan. Upon the completion of the written plan, the building contact/responsible party/owner shall submit the plan for approval to the Office of the Fire Marshal, located at 1100 4th St. SW, Suite E-700, Washington DC 20024 prior to the close of business. This plan shall be either emailed to [fems.fireprevention@dc.gov](mailto:fems.fireprevention@dc.gov) or faxed to 202-727-3238, to the attention of the "Fire Marshal." Any documents faxed should be preceded by a phone call to 202-727-1614. The business hours of the Fire Marshal's Office are 8:15 am to 4:45 pm, Monday through Friday. If the fire watch is required after normal business hours, the responsible party shall prepare the plan and be guided by the Fire Marshal Representative on the scene. If no one can be reached after the posted hours you may call the DC Fire and EMS Department Fire Liaison Officer at 202-373-3712 to assist in reaching the proper Fire Marshal representative.

### Plans:

The fire watch plan submitted for approval shall include, but not be limited to the following information:

1. Contract from a licensed monitoring/security company providing fire watch duties, and notation that personnel will only be utilized for fire watch duties. **Residents of buildings, janitorial staff, and maintenance personnel will not meet this requirement.**
2. Estimated duration of fire watch, estimated time for completion of repairs, estimated time for removal of hazardous conditions, or other specific situations which required the implementation of the fire watch. Note: In general fire watch in residential buildings will remain in place for 24 hours a day, and for commercial buildings will only be required while the building is occupied. The duration of the fire watch will be approved by the Fire Marshal.
3. Methods that will be utilized for identifying the fire watch personnel. The method of identification can be a uniform, vest, armband, highly visible shirt, or any other approved means.

4. Methods of communication to be used by fire watch personnel. Fire watch personnel are required to have radio communications between each other. This may be accomplished by the use of direct connect wireless, portable radios, etc.
5. Procedure to be used to rapidly notify the Fire Department and building occupants in the event of an emergency. Fire watch personnel shall not congregate at a central location, but should move about their assigned area constantly monitoring for hazardous conditions. (fires or potential situations which could create a fire)
6. Number of personnel required to sufficiently conduct inspections of all areas of the building, and allow for employee breaks. Fire watch personnel shall check all portions of the building at least hourly. More frequent checks may be mandated if required by the Fire Marshal. Special attention shall be paid to storage areas, janitor closets, utility spaces, basements, attics, penthouses, etc. and other normally unoccupied areas. The number of personnel required will vary depending upon factors such as, building size, and layout, impairment, level of risk, and compensatory measures. In general, the minimum number is as follows:
  - One fire watch person for every two floors of a building
  - One fire watch person for the main front desk, alarm panel room, or centralized location with a hard-wired telephone for calling 911.
  - One additional person shall be required for each (six) personnel to maintain watch during breaks for various reasons.
  - Under no circumstances will one person be acceptable for providing fire watch due to the aforementioned reason.
  - The final determination as to the required number of persons will be determined by the Fire Marshal.
7. Identification of inspection routes to be utilized by fire watch personnel. Note: No partial fire watch patrols are permitted. The entire building must be patrolled.
8. Experience of personnel being utilized for fire watch. Fire watch personnel shall be familiar with the property being protected, including: hazards, occupancies, fixed fire protection systems, manual and automatic detection and alarm systems.
9. Provide method to be utilized to record history of fire watch activities. (Provide example of log book, inspection forms, etc.)
10. Plan shall include a written acknowledgement statement that indicates the building contact/responsible party/owner understands that the guidelines must be adhered to as

approved, and if compliance is not maintained, the fire watch approval will be voided, and appropriate action will be taken in accordance with IFC. This can result in a significant violation of the fire code and a monetary fine.

### **Fire Watch Implementation:**

Once the building owner or representative is made or becomes aware of the need for a fire watch, it is his/her responsibility to immediately take steps necessary to ensure the life safety of all building occupants. This may require evacuating occupants of commercial buildings, restoring temporary power, changing the mission of the security force on duty, or others. If the fire department is on scene of the emergency resulting in the need for a fire watch, they will only provide a stop gap measure until the fire watch is established and in place. Once this period exceeds two (2) hours, the owner will be billed for the required fire department personnel to maintain the fire watches at the current hourly rate of \$65.00 per hour/per person until the owners fire watch personnel are in place. This is not to imply that a fire suppression company will await the arrival of a building representative during a confirmed malfunctioning alarm.

### **Cancellation of Fire Watch:**

It is the owners' responsibility to request the "fire watch" be discontinued once the fire protection system has been fully restored or the hazardous situation has been abated. If the owner has received a "Notice of Violation", a re-inspection must be requested through the Office of the Fire Marshal prior to the removal of the fire watch. The fire watch shall not be discontinued until the fire department provides written authorization for it to be discontinued. This will require a follow-up inspection by a fire inspector to verify that the impairment, hazard, or other condition has been abated. Requests can be made to the same contact email and/ or numbers listed previously.

Random inspections may occur by fire code official to ensure that all of the above provisions of the fire watch plan have been implemented and are being maintained. Noncompliance with fire watch orders shall result in a monetary fine starting at \$2,000 and will increase by \$2,000 during each site visit where noncompliance is observed by the fire code official.

**Note:** The DC Fire & EMS Department, Office of the Fire Marshal recognizes NFPA 25, Inspection, Testing and Maintenance of Water-Based Fire Protection Systems, and does not consider the testing and maintenance of fire protection systems to be an "outage" if the system is restored within four (4) hours, and/or the system remains in-service during the testing process.

## **FIRE WATCH PLAN EXAMPLE**

The ABC Management Company

1213 1<sup>st</sup> St. NW

Washington DC, 20023

## Request for Fire Watch Approval

Chief Fire Marshal,

The ABC Company has been made aware that our fire alarm system at 1213 1<sup>st</sup>. St. NW is inoperative and has been placed out of service until repairs can be made. We have contacted the DEF Alarm Company, who is on 24 hours emergency response for our properties, and they have advised a part needed to repair the system will take 24 hours to have shipped and installed. We have immediately put our staff on a limited fire watch pending the arrival of our fire watch personnel from GHI Security Company. I submit the following plan for approval of our fire watch at this location.

1. The GHI Security Company has been retained to provide fire watch duties beginning immediately, and I have attached a copy of the contract to this plan. They have been in the business for 15 years and have provided fire watch personnel for many other properties.
2. The Alarm Company hopes to have the system repaired and placed back in service within 36 hours. We will make notification once the repairs are completed.
3. The GHI security personnel will be readily identifiable through the uniform worn by all of their officers.
4. The GHI personnel will have hand-held radios to communicate with each other directly.
5. The GHI personnel will all have cellular telephones to rapidly notify the fire department, and bull horns to notify all occupants of an emergency, should one occur.
6. The fire marshal has determined we will be required to have four fire watch personnel to perform these duties based on his inspector's evaluation of the building, its layout and consideration of other factors.

If you require more information relating to a fire watch, please contact FEMS Office of the Fire Marshal for assistance.

**DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA FIRE & EMS DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF THE FIRE MARSHAL  
1100 4<sup>th</sup> SW Suite E700  
WASHINGTON, DC 20024  
(202) 727-1614**