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Understanding Residential Emergency Egress

In an emergency your safety is the most important issue

It's always important to understand the why.

So why is residential egress such an important factor in plan review and inspections? If we, as building plan examiners and inspectors, do our job, it assures you and your family can exit a dangerous situation no matter your location in the home when an emergency arises.

There are several locations in the home that require windows or doors to be available and of a particular size.

Basements, habitable attics and every sleeping room shall have at least one operable emergency escape opening by today's code. The minimum opening size for an emergency escape opening is 5 square feet. at grade, and 5.7 square feet for second floor and above. So, at this size we are usually talking about windows. Your bedroom must have at least one window that fits this minimum size in each bedroom, and a window seal height of no more than 44 inches measured from the floor to the bottom of the opening.

This is also true of your basement: Each bedroom in the basement is required to have at least one escape opening directly from the bedroom to the outside that allows you to move away from the structure.

So, what if the basement is completely underground? An escape opening is still required without going upstairs. The use of window wells is a common practice. This utilizes the same window dimensions with a well of not less than 9 square feet with a horizontal projection and width not less than 36 inches. If the well has a depth greater than 44 inches, it must be equipped with a permanently affixed ladder or steps to bring you to the outside of the structure.

Of course, a door can be used in the same manner as a window, it is confined to the same minimum area limitations as a window opening, and if in a basement it must be a side hinged door or a sliding door.

If you have submitted residential plans in the past or you submit them in the future, be aware that this will be the first thing we look for, because in an emergency your safety is the most important issue for an inspector.

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