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What's an FSES?

FSES stands for Fire Safety Evaluation System which is governed by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Code NFPA-101A.

I am getting a little ahead of myself here. Let's start from the beginning. Those skilled nursing homes and health care facilities which are governed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) are held to a higher level of construction life safety.

NFPAs "Life Safety Code" (NFPA 101) is the Construction Life Safety Standard against which health facilities are measured. These CMS governed facilities are subject to annual survey by state surveyors and sometimes federal surveyors. These surveys look at clinical, operational and environmental/physical plant compliance.

When a surveyor cites a facility for a potential life safety deficiency, they quote the specific section of NFPA 101 or a related code that governs the physical plant area in question.

Where a deficiency can easily be remedied, it is in the facilities best interest to do so in a timely manner. However, there are those deficiencies that are very costly and logistically difficult to remedy. These are usually cited when a code change occurs, and CMS will no longer allow a longstanding existing condition to be "Grandfathered". This is where NFPA 101A and FSES can potentially save the day.

NFPA 101A is about alternate approaches to Life Safety. FSES takes a "Whole Building" approach to assessing a building's relative degree of life safety.

In the FSES model, the building is judged across a range of criteria including; age of occupants, their location within the building, staff to occupant ratios, exit type & configuration, fire notification & extinguishing systems and interior furnishing/finish flammability.

These criteria categories are organized into a checklist with multiple choice answers in each category. Each "Answer" is assigned a point value based on its contribution to the building's relative degree of safety. For example, a non-sprinklered building gets a value of (-) 10 whereas a fully sprinklered building is assigned a value of (+)10. As you might suspect, positive numbers are "Good", negative numbers, not so much. When all the pluses and minuses are tallied up, a total score of zero or above is a passing grade.

Let me give you a real-world example. A 3-story nursing home building was cited for "un-enclosed duct shafts". Their vertical HVAC ducts were not properly enclosed in fire rated shafts. After evaluating the entire building, I noticed that resident floor corridor walls and corridor doors were fire rated (not normally required). This voluntary level of fire safety created a "Safety Surplus" and earned us enough points to pass the FSES.



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Sometimes, a failing FSES grade is not the end of the story. Think of the FSES as a typical spreadsheet. You change any single variable; you get a different answer. You can use the FSES as a tool to determine what remedial work will help you pass. You may find that one remedial option is less expensive and easier to execute than correcting the cited deficiency.

Let's go back to our "Unenclosed Duct Shaft" example. A client was cited for "Unprotected Steel". Their floor/ceiling construction needed a 1-Hour fire rating and over the years the original fire rated ceilings were inadvertently replaced with the non-rated type (a common occurrence).

I am sure you can imagine the disruption to resident care that would occur if ceilings were replaced throughout the building. Ownership and their construction advisor determined it was less disruptive and less costly to vertically extend corridor walls tight to the floor systems above and achieve a 1-Hour fire rating (existing corridor doors were already fire rated). The result was a passing grade on the FSES without having to address the original citation.

In this case it was necessary to obtain a Time Limited Waiver to give the facility the time needed to extend the corridor walls. An approved Time Limited Waiver from CMS keeps the facility in compliance while the work needed is completed.

John W. Baumgarten Architect, P.C. (JWB) has just launched an array of health care consulting services including FSES evaluations. JWB can help you evaluate your physical plant to support your capital budgeting process. We can also evaluate the physical plant of a potential acquisition to put you in a better negotiating position with the buyer.

Please let us know how we can help. It's What We Do!

