DPSAC News
Safety Corner
Protecting a Changing NIH

The following fire safety awareness article was prepared by the Division of the Fire Marshal, ORS.

Buildings are designed to serve specific needs of the occupants. At the NIH, those needs mostly include health care, laboratories, offices, storage, and assembly spaces of various sizes. Each of these occupancy types have unique requirements for fire alarm and fire suppression systems, as well as safe and efficient egress.

When the way a space is utilized changes from how it was designed, it may increase risk for the building occupants if the fire and life safety systems do not change with it.

It is important to remember that a change in use can occur without a construction project. Simply changing furniture and equipment within a room, or stockpiling materials could change the use of a room.

Common changes of use at the NIH include:

Health Care	↔	Storage
Closet	↔	IT Room
Office	↔	Laboratory
Office	↔	Conference Room

When there is a change of use, there is usually a change in the number of people within that space. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that the appropriate number of exits, travel distance to those exits, and door modifications are made to ensure people can exit the building safely and efficiently in the event of an emergency.

A change in use may also require a fire-resistant barrier to be put in place between areas of higher and lower hazard to help extend safe egress time.

Not all fire sprinkler systems are created equally – they are designed to protect different hazards.

For example, a laboratory space that uses flammable chemicals needs higher levels of protection than a standard office space. Also, new equipment or systems furniture could obstruct fire sprinkler spray patterns and leave large areas unprotected.

Fire alarm systems are also use specific, with requirements varying based on the types of hazards present and the number of people in a given area. As the use changes, fire alarm modifications may also be necessary in order to notify people of an emergency and communicate messages through the campus mass notification system.

If you have any questions about changes of use at the NIH, please contact the Division of the Fire Marshal, Office of Research Services at 301-496-0487 or e-mail 'Fire Marshal' in the NIH Global Address List.