

# LifeSafety



## Preparing for Fire Emergencies

By Fred P. Baumgartner and Ray Goulet

Increasing concern with health has led Canadians to change their eating habits. Restaurant patrons are selecting foods with less fat and cholesterol but, as an unwanted side effect, this has created a fire danger. Many commercial kitchens have switched from cooking in fryers with animal fats, such as lard, to using fat-free vegetable oils. Vegetable oils burn hotter than animal fat, so vegetable oil fires are also hotter and more difficult to extinguish. Kitchen fire suppression systems and fire extinguishers must be upgraded to ratings that will be able to put out these more severe fires.

All employees in a restaurant must be trained on where the fire extinguishers are and how to use them. They must also know how to activate the fire suppression system in the kitchen cooking areas. Employees should understand that their kitchen is the primary hazard area and receive ongoing fire safety training in preparation for all types of potential fire emergencies.

A fire in a restaurant is classified as a "public assembly fire." Events in the early stages of these fires are characterized by ambiguity and are often misinterpreted by the public. Patrons will naturally resist any change to the expected sequence of placing orders, eating and paying. Smoke in a restaurant is often assumed to be from the kitchen and non-threatening. The earliest clues of an uncontrolled fire are out of the ordinary noises such as breaking glass and extra activity by others, not flames or heavy smoke. However, these clues could be easily mistaken as business or an accident. The response is likely to be characterized by uncertainty, indecisiveness, the questioning of staff for information and incorrect conclusions.

Both the public and the employees often meet the sound of a fire alarm with indifference. This delay is critical because failure to act quickly in the initial stages of a public assembly or restaurant fire leads to last-minute panic and serious threats to life. Restaurant employees must become familiar with their approved Fire Safety Plan (FSP) and understand their role in a fire emergency. They must be able to identify the situation and be ready to assist with the evacuation of customers, including persons with special needs.

### Developing a Fire Safety Plan

Under the National Building Code, a restaurant with a seating capacity of more than 30 people is classified as a "Group A, Division 2" occupancy. These restaurants will require an FSP to be submitted to the local fire department for stamp and approval. Once this process has been completed, a copy should be placed in an approved FSP box at the main entrance to the restaurant. Failure to implement the provisions of an approved FSP is considered a serious violation of the National Fire Code.

The fire department normally inspects building premises to verify the standings of fire and life safety equipment and to

ensure that the FSP is being fully implemented. Restaurant operators and owners are ultimately responsible for guaranteeing that their premise complies with the National Fire Code and that their on-site FSP has been approved by a Chief Fire Official. The FSP must be reviewed by the owner and employees and amended regularly to include changes to the floor plan layout, exit paths, emergency telephone numbers and elected supervisory staff.

### Implementing the Fire Safety Plan

After an FSP has been approved, it must be applied. This may be as simple as distributing information on fire emergency procedures to staff and posting clear instructions for patrons. In order to ensure that patrons are aware of the layout and procedures in the plan, and to provide direction during an evacuation, signs should be used within the restaurant to identify areas of refuge, the location of emergency equipment and all exits. The restaurant owner must offer further guidance to employees as follows:

- Periodic information and awareness presentations for the staff,
- Direct training and instruction to individuals who are assigned special tasks,
- One-page handouts to each staff member, and
- Instructional videos.

### Exercising the Fire Safety Plan

The FSP involves training, practice and evaluation. In a restaurant environment, ensuring that patrons participate in awareness education may be a difficult undertaking.

As employees have key roles to play during a fire emergency, everyone working in the facility must have some form of training on the established FSP. This could include distribution of specific documentation regarding evacuation procedures, as well as technical training on the use of any special fire suppression or fire alarm systems. There must be periodic discussion forums with employees to review procedures: fire drills will determine if the procedures and communications are effective.

### The Fire Safety Plan Checklist

When preparing, posting or reviewing an FSP, the following items should be considered:

- Are there sufficiently detailed schematic drawings of the restaurant floor layout and exits?
- Is the FSP readily available at the main entrance of the restaurant for the responding firefighters?
- Have the employees received sufficient instruction on emergency procedures?
- Are the emergency procedures prominently displayed throughout the floor area and at exit points?



- Are the employees aware of how they can control fire hazards and reduce the occurrence of fires in the building?
- Are the duties and responsibilities of supervisory staff indicated in the FSP?
- Are alternates appointed in case elected supervisory staff members are absent?
- Are the supervisory staff trained to assume responsibility for the fire safety of others?
- Does the FSP outline all of the fire drill procedures, and are drills being conducted regularly?
- Does the FSP contain a maintenance schedule that specifies the frequency of necessary checks, inspections, and tests of all the building fire safety systems?
- Does the FSP identify all contractors who perform regular on-site maintenance?
- Is there a written history of tests and corrective measures to ensure that required maintenance is being performed?
- Does the FSP list the monitoring station contact information, phone numbers and security codes?

*Fred P. Baumgartner and Ray Goulet of Firepoint Technologies Inc. specialize in the development of approved Fire Safety Plans and evacuation procedures, assisting achievement of the highest level of fire and life safety awareness for occupants. Services include instructional programs such as fire drill training, evacuation planning, floor warden and supervisory team training and fire extinguisher demonstrations. For further information, call 905-874-9400, email [info@firepoint.cc](mailto:info@firepoint.cc) or visit [www.firepoint.cc](http://www.firepoint.cc).*