Churches as Temporary Housing

Applies to
State Fire Marshal Division staff and local Authorities Having Jurisdiction (AHJ).

Purpose
To provide guidance for the use of existing church buildings as temporary housing.

Policy
- It is the interpretation of the State Fire Marshal that this use does not represent a change in occupancy classification.
- A telephone or means of communication must be within 50 feet of the area being used for temporary housing.
- The church must notify emergency responders (police and fire departments) of the use of the building for temporary housing.
- Smoke alarms will be in each room used for sleeping purposes and in areas giving access to those rooms (i.e. hallways or corridors). The smoke alarms must be 120-volts and hard-wired with a battery back-up. Smoke detectors connected to an automatic fire alarm system could be used in lieu of single station smoke alarms.
- At least one portable fire extinguisher with a minimum rating of 2A-10BC must be within 75 feet of the area used for sleeping purposes.
- No smoking, cooking, candles, or other open flames are allowed in the rooms used for sleeping purposes.
- An evacuation diagram or map must be posted in each room used for sleeping purposes.
- Awake and alert adult chaperones or volunteers must be present whenever the spaces are being used for sleeping purposes.
- The building must meet the Minnesota State Fire Code requirements for an existing Group A-3 (assembly) occupancy.
- The area or rooms used for sleeping purposes must be on the level of exit discharge (i.e. the main level or a level that has exits to grade level). Up to three steps (or risers) are allowed. If these rooms cannot be located on the level of exit discharge, other levels can be used (i.e. basements or second stories) if the area or space has:
  - Two remote means of egress from the space.
  - Is protected with smoke detection connected to an automatic fire alarm system throughout the building.
  - In lieu of the automatic fire alarm system, automatic fire sprinkler protection throughout the building is acceptable.
• The area used for sleeping purposes must have access to two or more egress doors to the exterior.

• If the area being used for sleeping purposes utilizes a hallway or corridor, the hallway or corridor must be one-hour fire-rated, the building must be protected with automatic sprinklers throughout, or the means of egress system is protected with smoke detectors connected to an automatic fire alarm system.

• A maximum of 24 persons may be housed in the temporary shelter at any one time, not including church staff, volunteers or chaperones and the maximum number of weeks per year the church may be used as a temporary shelter is four.

Background
A request for an interpretation (FMCAP File 08-002-I) was presented to the Fire Marshal Code Advisory Panel (FMCAP) concerning the use of churches for temporary housing for homeless families. On March 26, 2008, the FMCAP opined that this type of use was accessory to the main occupancy (assembly) and resembled other similar activities such as church rectories, YMCA “lock-ins,” “shelters” at armories and similar buildings following disasters, or overnight school graduation parties. Even though these uses are not predominant in assembly occupancies, they do occur with some degree of regularity.

The FMCAP reviewed guidelines or policies from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Rochester along with feedback from fire officials in some metro-area communities who had dealt with these types of facilities in their communities. Most of them were comfortable with this type of arrangement if there were smoke alarms, smoke detectors connected to automatic fire alarm systems, or sprinkler protection in the church. Following these provisions makes this a safe and acceptable operation in existing church buildings.