

Providing Egress

BY DREW MARCHETTI

Being a member of NAFED is important to all of us. We have something in common—fire extinguishers and fire safety—and we work hard to increase the safety of commercial, industrial, and institutional buildings for our clients. The ultimate goal is simple: we aim to help save lives.

Of course, there's more to it than that. We are in the often-difficult position of teaching the public how and when fire extinguishers should be used. It is important that we educate people so they are capable of maintaining fire extinguishers as required by *NFPA 10, Standard for Portable Fire Extinguishers*.

Part of that education includes what I believe to be the primary use of portable fire extinguishers; that is, as personal devices of egress when the closest route of escape is closed or blocked because of fire. Proper use of a fire extinguisher—for just a few seconds—can be the difference between safe escape and certain death. Many people, however, including many fire marshals and inspectors, feel that the first thing to do when faced with a fire in the workplace or in a public building is to call 911. There are times when this is the case, times when a fire extinguisher is not the way to go. Because every fire is unique, we have to hope that each individual uses common sense and acts appropriately.

While extinguishers may not be the appropriate choice for saving an entire building, they are often appropriate to use in creating a safe path of egress. They go hand-in-hand with one of our other core businesses, which is the installation and maintenance of emergency lighting equipment and exit



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signs. So if fire extinguishers save lives, one at a time, day in and day out, why are some fire inspectors around the country suggesting the removal of fire extinguishers, particularly in sprin-

klered facilities?

I've spoken with a number of fire marshals who have allowed the removal of fire extinguishers for a variety of reasons. They point to possible vandalism (in schools and other youth facilities, for example) and a perceived lack of training among employees and others who would be in a position to use a fire extinguisher. Some fire marshals also seem to think that people who have fire extinguishers available will dally about calling for help, and try to put out a fire themselves, possibly putting themselves in jeopardy. One official with whom I spoke said, "If you can't put the fire out completely, why use fire extinguishers?" Another asked, "Does using this device postpone that all-important 911 call to the local fire department?" Others mentioned the mess that a typical ABC dry chemical fire extinguisher often causes. Still others say that just 1 percent of people are properly trained to use fire extinguishers. That's probably true. All of these justifications and rationalizations have probably been valid in certain circumstances. But does this mean that fire extinguishers should be removed on a widespread basis?

I think not.

Under certain circumstances, I believe that all of these comments have merit. But let's not confuse the issue: fire extinguishers can help to save lives by providing a path of safe egress, which is often impossible without them. This should be our message to fire marshals and inspectors.

As NAFED members, it should be our responsibility to promote the proper installation, maintenance, and use of



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fire extinguishers in residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional facilities, regardless of whether or not these buildings are sprinklered. Fire extinguishers should be seen as the personal safety devices that they are, and should not be viewed as a distraction that can delay people from calling for help and exiting a building safely.

People need that ability to get out—never mind putting out a fire to save a piece of property. They need just enough space to create a path of egress. Saving lives is the primary purpose of fire extinguishers. Property is secondary.

For those of us in the life safety service and fire extinguisher business, all of this should seem perfectly clear. One large national distributor of fire extinguishers said recently, "When successful, fire extinguishers preclude the use of an automatic sprinkler system and sometimes the arrival of the fire department. Balanced fire protection saves lives."

What's the bottom line? At Life Safety Service & Supply, we focus on helping to save lives through the proper installation and regular maintenance of emergency lighting equipment and fire suppression systems. We know what building owners and facility managers must do to maximize building safety and the safety of building occupants. We know that the *NEC (National Electrical Code)* and NFPA set the standards for building safety. It's our responsibility, as good businesspeople in this industry and as NAFED members, to get the word out.

Education is key, along with the cooperation of state and local fire marshals and inspectors who concern themselves every day with the ultimate safety of building occupants. Why tell building

Have you got a fire extinguisher success story to send in? How about some company news you'd like to share? Maybe there is some legislative activity going on in your area that might be of interest to other NAFED members. Whatever it is, NAFED wants to hear from you.

Please send in your stories to the editor, and remember that all contributions become the property of NAFED, are subject to editing for space and clarity, and are included as space allows.

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NAFED appreciates your contribution!

Providing Egress continued...

owners that they don't need fire extinguishers if they have a sprinkler system? I believe that the advantages of having fire extinguishers far outweigh any disadvantages.

Should we be concerned about whether designated employees may or may not be trained to use fire extinguishers properly? That concern may be alleviated as we offer training programs to those people designated as on-site fire extinguisher operators.

Should we be concerned about possible vandalism in daycare centers, schools, and universities when the safety of so many people may be jeopardized? What can we do, as NAFED members, to reduce the possibility of vandalism and damage to fire extin-

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guishers in public buildings?

What can we do about building owners and property managers who suggest that fire extinguishers are no longer nec-

essary because a building is equipped with sprinklers? We need to make a greater effort to reach those people about the accessibility of portable fire extinguishers and the availability of vandal-prevention devices. In addition, perhaps building owners should be reminded of the high cost of water damage from sprinkler systems that might not have been necessary if a fire extinguisher was available and used properly.

As members of NAFED, we're the experts, and we know that education is the key to public safety in virtually all facilities. What role do we play in the education of fire extinguisher use? You will help to increase the level of public safety and boost your own sales opportunities by offering training programs.

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With every customer meeting, we should teach, we should remind, and we should demonstrate proper fire extinguisher maintenance and usage. We should train employees in “quick checks” and other do’s and don’ts for proper and effective operation.

Let’s be sure that as NAFED members, we bring appropriate training programs into the community. Fire extinguisher training programs are a natural for health-care facilities and major corporations concerned about the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), OSHA, and other building and safety requirements. These programs should be tailored for employees, small business owners, individual property owners, real estate agents—

everyone who must abide by NFPA standards and local or state requirements—and others who don’t want to take any chances and be caught short.

What does it take to familiarize the public with fire extinguishers, their proper maintenance, and usage in the event of a fire? There’s no magic here—it’s simple. We’re talking about critical life safety systems during a time when terrorism and personal safety make the headlines every day. Why not talk about fire extinguishers in your community? Meet with fire marshals, inspectors, and customers. See what’s on their minds, and work with them to help spread the word: fire extinguishers are portable personal egress devices that can help to save lives when used properly.

Life Safety Service & Supply LLC opened its doors in 1997 to service, repair, and upgrade emergency lighting equipment, DC and AC inverter systems, and exit signs. Entering the field of fire suppression systems was a logical expansion into another phase of the life safety industry, allowing the company to offer additional critical services to existing customers.

Drew Marchetti is the founder and president of Life Safety Service & Supply LLC in Cheshire, Connecticut. He has been involved in the sales and service of life safety products for nearly twenty years. ♦

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