



## Course Learning Outcomes for Unit III

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

5. Describe inspection practices and procedures.

## Reading Assignment

### Chapter 4:

Fire Prevention Through the Codes Process

### Chapter 5:

Plan Review

## Unit Lesson

Diamantes (2016) tells us that *codes* are “merely systemically arranged bodies of laws and rules; they tell us what to do or what not to do” (p. 62). Codes are written in the wake of research and develop what typically, and historically, have followed major incidents, such as fire, natural, and/or man-made disasters. Codes are written as safeguards for the future and, once implemented, should provide society with a reasonable degree of safety from harm.

When a code is composed, it must be adopted. The organization who developed or wrote the code, typically adopts it first, such as the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). The code might be submitted directly to a federal, state, or local government unit for acceptance (adoption). Then, it is handed over to the appropriate enforcement agency within the governmental unit. An example of appropriate governmental units might be the State Fire Marshal’s office or the local fire department’s Fire Prevention Bureau.

When a state adopts a code, it is typically written into the acts of the year, in which the code was adopted as an official governing law. Upon adoption, at the federal level, it is applicable to all three levels of government, if so stipulated. In the case of fire codes, these are typically applicable to all levels of government.

Keep in mind that while most people abhor government intervention, we need governmental input and support in order to develop and enact codes and standards in an effort to protect and preserve our society. Without codes and standards, our nation—as previously noted—would likely be reduced to smoldering ash and rubble. We must continually keep in mind that, in spite of the many established codes and standards now in place, there are those who continue to snub their noses and turn their backs on fire prevention.

First, think of all the multi-story tenements in large metropolitan cities such as Boston, New York, Chicago, Dallas, and Los Angeles, to name a few. Next, consider the potential number of individual units or apartments. Now, think about a single electrical code violation in a 10-story, 40 unit building, on the lower eastside. The building owner is infamous and well-known to the Fire Prevention Bureau/Office for code violations, including blocked exits, piles of combustible rubbish in the basement, missing smoke and heat detectors, along with a variety of other violations.

The building owner has been cited and fined so many times that his picture is affixed to a wall just outside the municipal code court. In short, he’s making enough money off of rents to offset fines handed to him from several municipal inspectors, so his only concern is money. Then one afternoon in early fall, a fire breaks out in two of the four apartments on the fifth floor. Luckily the occupants of these two apartments are not home; however, the two other apartments have occupants, as do many of the apartments above and below the fifth floor.

The fire department is summoned, and the fire is confined to the two apartments. The investigation identifies the point-of-origin in the basement rubbish piles. A source of ignition was possibly a discarded cigarette that ignited a pile of rubbish and quickly spread to other piles. A long, abandoned laundry chute above the fire allowed heat to rise up the chute and exit into the two apartments. Nearly all of the old chute had been removed, except these two sections, which were hidden behind three layers of wallpaper.

Further investigation reveals that the owner had no knowledge of the existing sections of laundry chute and claimed to have never seen any building plans prior to his purchase several years earlier. Though he has been cited for unlawful rubbish accumulation in the basement, he denied any knowledge of the chute. Within the Fire Prevention Office of the fire department, an inspector, who had conducted numerous code violation inspections all resulting in the issue of a fine, claims he too had not noticed the three by three foot opening of the end of the chute directly over the rubbish piles. Now we have a conundrum.

Who should be held accountable? Building owner? Fire Inspector? Both? Truly a "Catch-22," if ever there was one. Apparently all of the codes and standards in the universe might not have prevented the discarded source of ignition; however an ever-vigilant inspector should have noticed an opening of that size. This is an example of Monday morning quarter-backing at its best. So, how does society cope with these differences in the aftermath of a fire? Educate inspectors to be highly cognizant of every nook and cranny during an inspection? Enact steeper penalties for intentional violators of the codes?

If a choice were to be made here, it might be worth the financial investment to educate inspectors, and past violators, with a better understanding of code enforcement. Are there such educational programs in America? The answer to that question is a resounding yes! Many public, and private, organizations whose purposes are to research, study, analyze, develop, and enact codes and standards, offer numerous educational opportunities for both public and private inspectors as well as building owners and managers.

Where does one find these resources? You can locate them using a search engine on the Internet, which is an excellent starting point. What organizations might you search? Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA), Southern Building Code Congress International (SBCCI), International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO), and International Code Council (ICC) are excellent resources for building and related codes. These organizations oversee much of the building code development for the entire nation and offer various programs for both public and private sector interests.

Fire prevention information can be found by visiting the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) website. NFPA was founded in 1896 and has its headquarters in Quincy, Massachusetts. NFPA provides detailed investigation and research into every dimension of fire protection and prevention known to modern man. From the NFPA comes Fire Prevention Week, which began in 1920, under a proclamation by former President Woodrow Wilson (NFPA, 2015). Through NFPA, a wide range of educational programs and seminars can be found that are designed to educate both public officials and private sector building contractors and owners.

NFPA also offers several certification programs for individuals working in fire prevention and protection occupations as well as private sector citizens wishing to embark on a new career or for personal interest. While most states do not require public fire prevention officers or personnel to be certified by a nationally or internationally recognized organization, the current trend is a movement that will one day require all public and private fire prevention employees to possess a valid certification. Typically this certification is as a fire protection specialist or fire inspector.

The impetus for this trend is a result of a number of large scale incidents, such as The Station nightclub in 2003, which, if you recall, claimed 100 lives and nearly 200 injured concert attendees. Most American public fire department and fire prevention bureaus/offices are staffed by non-certified personnel. For the most part, these personnel received their education and training while on the job. Why should we require personnel to be certified? In a few words: professional validation. Certification, coupled with occupational experience, holds a much greater position in a court of law and other related venues where personnel are likely to be interviewed, interrogated, or required to provide testimony. Certification comes with a price, however, as investigations and testimony from a certified officer is nearly indisputable!

## References

Diamantes, D. (2016). *Principles of fire prevention* (updated 3rd ed.). Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning.

National Fire Protection Association. (2015). About fire prevention week. Retrieved from <http://www.nfpa.org/safety-information/fire-prevention-week/about-fire-prevention-week>

## Suggested Reading

You may have an interest in obtaining a certification credential from the National Institute for Certification of Engineering Technologies. Visit their website for more information:

National Institute for Certification In Engineering Technologies. (n.d.). Become certified. Retrieved from <http://www.nicet.org/>

You may have an interest in obtaining a certification credential as a Certified Fire Plan Examiner (CFPE) through National Fire Protection Association. Visit their website for more information:

National Fire Protection Association. (n.d.). Certified Fire Plan Examiner. Retrieved from <http://www.nfpa.org/training/certification-programs/certified-fire-plan-examiner-i>

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911 set the stage for the development and creation of numerous building, fire, and life safety codes in the USA.

United States Department of Labor. (n.d.). The Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911. Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/shirtwaist/>