

High-Rises to Be Held Accountable in Life-Safety Ordinance

Out of 732 buildings, most of them residential high-rises, the city says a whopping 62 percent have failed to comply

By [Phil Rogers](#)

A Friday deadline looms for high rise buildings to get up to code and install sprinklers. NBC 5's Phil Rogers reports. (Published Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2014)

Eleven years after a tragic fire in the County Administration Building at 69 West Washington, the City of Chicago says it will finally hold Chicago high-rises accountable for failing to comply with a life-safety ordinance, which many fire professionals already considered more than generous.

Nine years after that ordinance was passed, and three years after building owners were granted an extension, the deadline expires Wednesday. And out of 732 buildings, most of them residential high-rises, the city says 62 percent have failed to comply.

"Some buildings used this last year to come into compliance, and some buildings haven't," says Building Commissioner Felicia Davis. "There are some buildings that have thumbed their nose at the process the entire time. And truthfully, for those buildings, I will be seeking the maximum fine."

Those fines range from \$1,000 to \$2,500 per day. Davis says for the most part, she's more interested in bringing buildings into compliance than levying hefty financial penalties. But to get that compliance, after repeated cajoling, on Friday she will take some 400 buildings to court.

"I was very clear from the beginning that this deadline was not moving," she said. "Our goal when we take buildings into court is to get compliance with the building code."

Earlier this year, 55 other buildings were referred to court for failing to comply with the ordinance.

"There were buildings that we referred to court that had not submitted the basic life-safety plan, which was the road map for how they were going to make the building safe," Davis said.

Many fire experts argue that the city life-safety evaluation ordinance lets buildings off easy. They consider fire sprinklers the gold standard of protection, and indeed, sprinklers have been required in all new construction in

Chicago since the '70s.

But after six people died in the fire at 69 West Washington in October of 2003, the City Council stopped short of requiring sprinklers, in the face of massive opposition from building owners and condo boards.

Instead, they adopted a detailed life-safety plan, requiring buildings to implement features like two-way communications with each unit, self-closing doors, and automatic recall for elevators, preventing them from traveling to fire floors.

Buildings choosing to go the extra mile and install sprinklers were exempted from the life-safety deadline. Some 78 buildings have chosen sprinklers, even though they were not required to do so.

“Everybody was in agreement that sprinklers were the way to go,” says Kevin Connellan, condo board president at 400 W. Deming. “I think for all of us on the board, safety is really our first priority.”

Of the 732 buildings required to submit life-safety plans, only 277 made the deadline.

Now, Davis says her department expects quick compliance, for building owners who she concedes, probably thought the deadline would shift again.

“They thought I was bluffing,” she said.

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