SAFETY TALKS:
Fire Safety & Preparedness for Offices

Office work is generally considered a low-hazard occupation. That doesn't mean hazards aren't present or that emergencies may not arise. During the five-year period of 2007-2011, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) estimates that U.S. fire departments responded to an average of 3,340 fires in office properties per year.

Preventing office fires is an important component to any safety and health program, and should include requirements to keep excess papers and files stored in file cabinets and keeping chemicals properly stored (so they don't become fuel for fires); and ensuring ignition sources are identified and controlled, such as prohibiting candles, keeping space heaters at least 3 feet from combustible materials, and ensuring electrical equipment is used in accordance with its listing and labeling, and not over-loading power strips. Of course, always keep emergency exits free and clear of stored materials.

When fires do occur, it's important to ensure employees take the proper actions.

First, always take fires seriously. Treat every fire alarm as if it is a real emergency. Don't assume it's a drill.

Second, call the fire department as soon as you evacuate. Never wait to investigate the situation before notifying the fire department. Any delay will allow the fire to grow and further endanger your employees.

Third, be ready with information. When calling 911, employees should be able to accurately relay the building address, as well as the closest cross streets.

Also, it's important to close doors as you leave. This can reduce the spread of smoke and flame to other parts of the building. Employees should be trained to never take the elevator during a fire. Employees could be trapped in the elevator if it stops working properly, and the elevator shafts could fill with smoke.

Have a designated assembly point where employees should meet up with their supervisors and remain until it is either safe to reinter the building or they are dismissed. They should be trained not to leave the assembly area and to stay off their phones, and pay attention to any instructions provided by the incident commander or managers.

Conduct emergency drills at least once, if not twice a year. Frequent drills can ensure employees not only know what to do, but can demonstrate it. Practicing emergency procedures can ensure inappropriate levels of panic (too much or too little) do not put employees at risk if, and when, a real event occurs. Drills also help you find weaknesses in your emergency procedures that need to be addressed before a real emergency arises. Your local fire department may also welcome the opportunity to participate in your drills, so your employees know what to expect from them, an