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ARE EMERGENCY EVACUATION DRILLS WORTH THE TIME?

BACKGROUND

On December 17, 2009, a scheduled emergency evacuation drill was conducted at the Tulare County Government Plaza Building (Government Plaza) located on the 5900 block of South Mooney Boulevard in Visalia, California. Emergency evacuation drills are conducted periodically under the direction of the Tulare County Safety Officer. Emergency evacuation drills ensure that occupants of the Government Plaza can exit the facility safely in a timely manner, and be accounted for at pre-assigned assembly areas. The purpose of these drills is to prepare the occupants on procedures to follow in the event an emergency building evacuation is required. They are also intended to identify emergency equipment deficiencies and discover irregularities that need to be corrected.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

On December 17, 2009, the Grand Jury was notified there would be a fire drill. The Jury was informed to exit the building through the north-side door located on the first floor. During the exercise, there was some confusion on the part of several participants of this drill as to how to exit the building and where to assemble upon exiting. Due to this event the 2009-2010 Tulare County Grand Jury elected to investigate the emergency procedures in place at the Government Plaza.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

1. Interviewed relevant witnesses
2. Reviewed relevant records, documents and policies
3. Walk through inspection of the Government Plaza with Safety Officer

FINDINGS

1. During the Government Plaza emergency evacuation drill on December 17, 2009 the following was observed:
 - a. Some agencies did not have an assigned individual to check if in fact all persons in their agency had

- b. actually left the building.
- b. There was not a specific assembly area designated for each agency and/or branches thereof. (There are several branches/units of different Tulare County agencies housed in the Government Plaza.)
- c. At least one agency did not have an individual designated to contact the person in charge of the drill to report all pertinent information.
- d. People were trying to use the elevator to exit the building.
- e. Disabled persons having difficulty evacuating from the second floor.

2. The Tulare County Safety Officer, from Risk Management, organized the emergency evacuation drill and invited the Visalia City Fire Department to observe and participate in the exercise.
3. The previous fire and emergency evacuation drill conducted at the Government Plaza was over three years ago.
4. The Government Plaza Building is owned by Tulare County and located within the Visalia City limits.

5. Building maintenance for the Government Plaza was the responsibility of the Tulare County Resource Management Agency (RMA) in December 2009. On January 26, 2010, this responsibility was taken over by the Tulare County Administrative Office, General Services Division.
6. The walk through inspection of the Government Plaza revealed:
 - b. Several emergency lights do not function.
 - c. Some offices do not have emergency illuminated exit signs above the doors as required.
 - d. At least one hallway does not have any type of backup lighting or an illuminated exit sign.
 - e. In three places, where illuminated exit signs do exist, they need to be repositioned.
7. Procedures regarding the safe evacuation of physically disabled individuals from the second floor are not adequate.
8. The Tulare County Safety Officer provided all agencies in the Government Plaza with a summary report of the December 17, 2009 fire and emergency evacuation drill. However, this report does not include all of the deficiencies identified by the walk through inspection.
9. Prior to December 17, 2009, some agencies housed at the Government Plaza did not have written or posted Fire and Emergency Evacuation Plans.
10. Abatement of all unsafe conditions have not been completed in an expeditious manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Emergency and evacuation drills are essential and necessary to help save lives in case of a real emergency. The emergency evacuation drill did identify several problematic issues and emergency equipment deficiencies. However, not all of these issues were discovered at the time of the drill. The fact that they were not reported to the Tulare County Safety Officer initially, demonstrates the need for improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Post fire and emergency evacuation procedures at all designated emergency exit doors within each of the office facilities throughout the Government Plaza as well as all other occupied Tulare County buildings.
2. Perform fire prevention inspections more thoroughly to identify potential safety hazards within the Government Plaza.
3. Provide fire and emergency evacuation procedures to all personnel during their orientation and training.
4. Conduct emergency and evacuation drills annually at the Government Plaza and all other occupied Tulare County buildings.
5. Require all agencies within the Government Plaza to communicate, with the County Safety Officer in writing, to identify all emergency equipment deficiencies and what corrective actions are initiated after every emergency evacuation drill.
6. Check every office, as part of the emergency evacuation drill to ensure

a written Fire and Emergency Evacuation Plan is posted.

7. Require all agencies within the Government Plaza to develop written procedures to accommodate the safe evacuation of physically disabled occupants and visitors from the second floor.
8. Identify and initiate corrective actions to ensure the proper installations of illuminated exit signs in corridors and

above designated emergency exit doors throughout the Government Plaza and all other occupied Tulare County buildings.

9. Monitor to ensure emergency equipment is tested and maintained as required by the preventive maintenance schedules.
10. Complete abatement of all unsafe conditions in a timely manner.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Tulare County Association of Governments
Tulare County Administrative Office, Print and Mail Services
Tulare County Counsel, Risk Management Division, Safety Officer
Tulare County Fire Department
Tulare County Health and Human Services Agency
Tulare County Information Technology
Tulare County Registrar of Voters
Tulare County Resource Management Agency, Director
Tulare County Resource Management Agency, Government Plaza Safety Manager
Tulare County Resource Management Agency, Government Plaza Maintenance Manager