

Office Fire Safety Hazards

Don't Let Your Historic Building Become a Historic Ruin

The historic buildings on Capitol Hill are some of our country's most prized architectural landmarks. But they are also overcrowded—and potentially hazardous—office spaces.

Space Heaters

Old, historic buildings often translate to cold, drafty workspaces. If space heaters are allowed in your building, be sure the one you are using is safe. Space heaters in the workplace must be approved for commercial use by a recognized safety testing laboratory such as Underwriters Laboratories, and they must have a mechanism that automatically turns off the heater if it tips over. Unplug your space heater when it's not in use, keep it at least 3 feet from any flammable materials—including that mountain of paperwork on the floor—and never plug it into an extension cord.

Extension Cords

Extension cords may have become a way of life in century-old buildings retrofitted for modern conveniences, but they are still one of the leading causes of office fires. Extension cords are meant to be used as temporary fixes, not as permanent wiring. Light-weight, residential brown and white extension cords are not made to handle the electric current from a copier, two printers, and a coffee maker—and often much more. If you do have to use an extension cord, make sure it's been approved by a safety testing laboratory, don't use it for more

than 90 days and don't plug more than one device into it at a time.

Daisy Chains

One of the most common safety hazards found on Office of Compliance inspections of the legislative branch are "Daisy Chains," a series of extension cords and power strips plugged into one another. Office of Compliance inspectors discovered more than 2,400 daisy chain violations in their inspections of the 109th Congress alone. Quite often, a power strip can be a safe substitute for a series of extension cords. For a better long-term solution, however, consider requesting that more outlets or modular furniture with wired outlets be installed in your office.

Power Cords

Power cords that have been used for years and passed from office to office inevitably show wear after a while. Damaged and ungrounded cords are a serious fire hazard and violate safety codes. To prevent the cord under your desk from setting your office on fire, inspect the cords in your workspace regularly and throw away a power cord if you discover any damaged or exposed wires.

Sprinkler Heads

In historic buildings, properly functioning sprinkler heads are especially important. Fire sprinklers are meant to detect and suppress fires, but they can't do their job



Image courtesy Public Schools of San Luis Obispo County, California. Reproduced with permission. www.slosipe.org

effectively if they're blocked by stacks of boxes or other storage materials. Regardless of how cramped the office, items should never be placed higher than 18 inches below a sprinkler. Just clearing items from the area immediately surrounding the sprinkler head is not sufficient, as nothing in the room should be more than 18 inches from the ceiling in order for sprinklers to work effectively.

Open Flames

Candles and burning incense are inappropriate for the workplace under nearly all conditions, so speak with your manager or building property manager before lighting up. Even if your building and office allow an open flame—for example, when used in a sterno cup to keep food warm on a serving line—be sure to extinguish it when no one is around.

Combustible Materials

Pieces of paper, file folders, take-out containers, even rugs and upholstered furniture, are all combustible materials. Good housekeeping in office workspaces should be the norm. Keep your personal workspace as clean as possible and periodically perform a little extra housecleaning to guard against accumulating combustibles, as this is a potential fire hazard.

Fire Doors

Fire doors both slow the spread of toxic gasses and smoke during a fire, and compartmentalize space to prevent flames from spreading. Holding fire doors open—or blocking them with furniture or other items—creates a significant fire hazard. Fire doors may be held open through the use of a mechanic device if they are set up to automatically close when a fire alarm sounds. Otherwise, they must be properly closed and easily accessible. Removing the “Exit” sign or other signage from a fire door does not remove its fire door status, nor is it acceptable. Talk to your office manager or other responsible party if you’re unsure of whether a door is intended to serve as a fire door.

Exit Signage

Regardless of how many precautions are taken, a fire may still start in your building, which is why signs that point the way to safety are so important. All “Exit” signs must be large enough and clear enough to be read, and must be illuminated in some way. Similarly, areas that look like exits but are not must be clearly marked with a “No Exit” sign.

Take Action

If you suspect that your workspace poses any of these fire hazards, notify the responsible party immediately. This may be your office manager or the company or office responsible for repairs and upkeep.

You may also call the Office of Compliance at (202) 724-9250 to request an inspection of your workspace or to speak with a health and safety specialist. Visit www.compliance.gov for more information.

Office of Compliance

fast facts

LEARN MORE TIPS ON KEEPING YOUR OFFICE SAFE
and see pictures of some of the fire hazards found on
Office of Compliance inspections at www.compliance.gov.

Visit the eResources page to download some “Fast Facts.”



Office of Compliance

Room LA 200, John Adams Building

t/ 202-724-9250

tdd/ 202-426-1912

f/ 202-426-1913

Recorded Information Line/ 202-724-9260

www.compliance.gov

The Office of Compliance advances safety, health, and workplace rights in the U.S. Congress and the Legislative Branch. Established as an independent agency by the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995, the Office educates employees and employing offices about their rights and responsibilities under the Act, provides an impartial dispute resolution process, and investigates and remedies violations of the Act.

This information does not constitute advice or an official ruling of the Office of Compliance or the Board of Directors and is intended for educational purposes only. For further information, please refer to the Congressional Accountability Act (2 U.S.C 1301 et seq.) and the regulations issued by the Board, or you may contact the Office of Compliance.