

SAFETY LESSONS FROM THE RI TRAGEDY

Following The Station Nightclub Fire, Beacon Mutual Insurance Co. Inspectors Visited 142 Similar Hospitality Establishments and Here's What They Found

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February 20th, 2003 is a date the people of Rhode Island will never forget. It was the day of The Station nightclub fire.

While much attention has been given to the tragedy of the fire itself, very little has been written on safety conditions in similar venues across the country.

Following the fire, The Beacon Mutual Insurance Co. of Rhode Island embarked on a quest to inspect 142 similar Rhode Island facilities to reduce the chances of this tragedy happening again.

The 142 facilities ranged from large 30,000 square foot nightclubs, to small neighborhood



Blocked exit paths and locked exit discharges

bars and restaurants. Any Beacon insured with a bartending class code was subject to inspection by Beacon's loss prevention staff. Utilizing an enhanced inspection form, and with fresh training under their belts, the Beacon staff inspected for life safety and general safety compliance.

The results varied. Since many bars and restaurants had already been subject to inspections by a municipal fire department or insurance carrier immediately after the fire, insureds were gen-

erally cooperative. All of the clubs applied flame-retardants, removed combustibles and repaired broken exit signs and lights. Some establishments completely shut down



Tied back fire doors

until they felt their operation was safe for patrons to return.

One nightclub in Warwick went above and beyond code by installing low-level lighting and additional exit signs.

While Beacon applauds the efforts of club owners who strive to make their facility as safe as possible, some owners were not as receptive to diminishing potential hazards.

Some places were found with blocked exit paths and locked exit discharges. (Photos were taken in various Rhode Island establishments.)

In one location, a high chair and table blocked an exit path, and the fenced in alley was padlocked and surrounded with barbed wire.

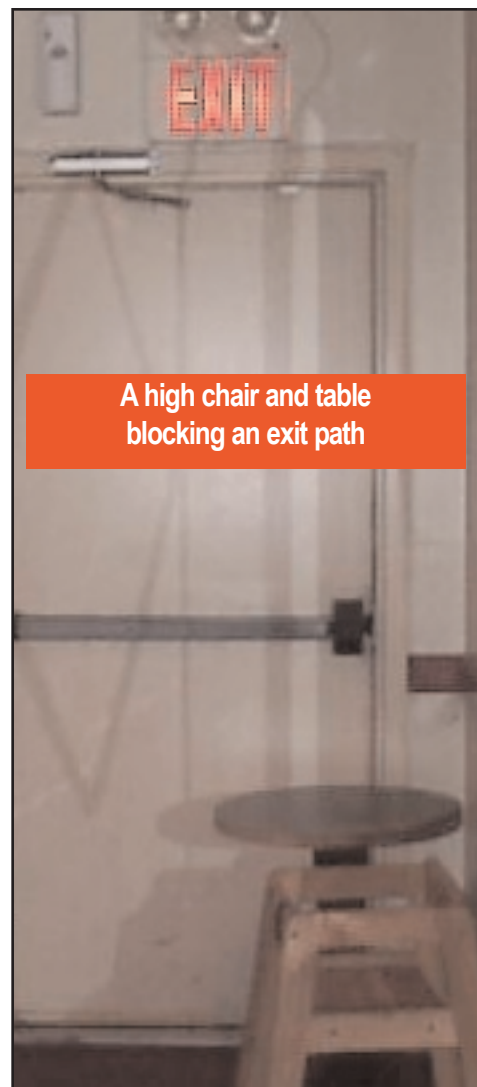
Some venues had tied back their fire doors, which were located in stairwells. Having these fire doors restrained is extremely dangerous, because, in the event of a fire, smoke and heat would travel up the staircase and block the exit completely.

Most facilities had functioning alarms, but did not have emergency action plans.

Employees were never trained on how to assist in an evacuation, or on proper procedures in the event of an emergency.

While the potential for slips and falls were generally well controlled, fire hazards were present

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A high chair and table blocking an exit path



Unsecured compressed gas cylinders

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due to poor housekeeping, overloaded electrical outlets, exposed electrical wiring and flammable liquid storage.

One particular nightclub had overflowing trash receptacles in the lavatory, which created a sea of paper towels on the floor - inside and outside of the bathroom. Patrons are prone to discard-

ing cigarette butts onto the floor and evidence of improper cigarette disposal could be found throughout the club. Unfortunately, patrons will also discard cigarette butts in any wall opening or crevice, regardless of the danger.

In addition to eliminating safety hazards to patrons, the Beacon staff also worked to mitigate potential hazards to employees of the establishments. For employees, the most common hazards were unsecured compressed gas cylinders. Almost every facility has these bottles, similar to the cylinder shown in the photo, for soda fountains. These vessels should always be secured to a wall with a chain. If a vessel was to fall over, and the valve knocked off, the vessel could become a missile, flying through any type of wall until expended. An additional hazard arises if the bottle falls on someone's foot and impairs successful evacuation.

From a workers compensation view, ergonomic related injuries from material handling also creates a tremendous potential for employee injury. Most facilities had odd storage arrangements for bulk food and alcohol, such as attics,

basements, outside sheds and garages. The risk of back, shoulder and neck strains were greater at facilities which did not use same-level-storage locations or material handling equipment including hand trucks, conveyors and dumb waiters. Most facilities stated that oftentimes bouncers at the club would be asked to move cases or kegs of alcohol, which merely transfers the risk instead of diminishing it.

Management and owners of restaurants, bars and nightclubs can make their facilities safer for both guests and employees by conducting regular safety inspections and training staff to recognize safety hazards. Assistance is typically available from local fire departments, property or workers compensation insurance carrier, private safety consultants, or from your local OSHA office. A wealth of free training information and safety checklists are available free of charge on OSHA's web site at www.osha.gov.

Ehrmantraut works as a Loss Prevention Consultant for The Beacon Mutual Insurance Co. in Rhode Island.