

Smoke Detector FAQ

Where are smoke detectors required?

At a minimum, one smoke detector is required on each level of a unit. This means there must be at least one smoke detector on each floor of the unit, including but not limited to the basement, 1st floor, 2nd floor, 3rd floor, attics, etc. The smoke detector must be on the level it is protecting. For example, it cannot be located at the top of the basement stairwell to protect the basement. It must be located on the basement level.

Then why did the PPHA tell me I need more than one smoke detector on a level?

There are only two times when an additional smoke detector is required on the same level:

- One scenario will be when there is a bedroom located at the front of the unit and another in the far rear of the unit. If a smoke detector is installed near the front bedroom, the rear bedroom is too far away to be protected. In such case, the PPHA will require a smoke detector be installed either in or near both bedroom areas.
- The other condition would apply when there is a “common area” hallway in the unit (i.e. in over/under duplexes there will be a rear or front common stairwell). In that case, there not only needs to be appropriately located smoke detectors inside the unit, but also outside of the unit on each level of the common hallway or stairwell.

Why do I need a smoke detector in my attic if it isn't finished?

Even if the attic is unfinished, if the resident still has access to it (by a fixed set of stairs, with a handrail if there is more than four steps) for storage, a closet, playroom, TV room, etc., regardless of what the use may be, it still needs a smoke detector. It is no different than requiring a smoke detector for an unfinished basement that is available to the resident, but not an inaccessible crawlspace.

What do you mean that the smoke detector is improperly located?

HQS requires that smoke detector installation be in compliance with the most current version of NFPA codes concerning installation requirements. Such installation requirements are usually included when purchasing a new smoke detector. In summary, the proper location of a smoke detector is as follows:

- The smoke detector can be installed on either a wall or ceiling.
- However, if mounted on a wall, the smoke detector must be located from the corner of a wall and ceiling no less than 4 inches and no further than 12 inches.
- If mounted on a ceiling, it must be located no less than 4 inches from the corner of a wall and ceiling.
- If unfinished areas, such as an attic or basement, the smoke detector cannot be installed on the side of a floor joist or roof truss. The smoke detector must be installed flat on the bottom edge of the floor joist or roof truss. NFPA has determined through tests that the smoke will curl and stay below the joist/truss instead of going up in between them.

Whose responsibility is it to repair an inoperable or missing smoke detector?

For the unit to pass the initial HQS inspection, all smoke detectors had to be working and installed properly. This inspection was done when the unit was still vacant. Since then, the only thing that would have changed is that the resident has moved in and time may have caused the battery or smoke detector itself to wear out. During an annual HQS inspection, if the smoke detector has failed because the whole unit or battery is missing, then the PPHA would identify it as a tenant responsibility to repair or replace. However, if there never was a smoke detector installed where one needs to be or the smoke detector has a battery installed and looks to be in working condition, but does not sound when tested, it will be identified as a landlord responsibility to remedy.

Suggestions to Keeping Smoke Detectors Working

It is understood that it takes a constant effort to keep smoke detectors in place and operating. Here are some simple suggestions that may help.

- Locate the smoke detectors as far away from the kitchen and bathroom areas as possible. The steam given off from cooking and bathing will set off a smoke detector. False alarms are the most common reason a resident will disconnect a smoke detector.
- When the smoke detector “chirps” every minute or so, that means the battery needs to be replaced. This will drive a person crazy. This is the 2nd most common reason a resident will disconnect a smoke detector.

- Replace your smoke detector batteries frequently, every spring and fall when we change our clocks, make appointment to visit your units for routine preventative maintenance and inspections, such as changing the furnace filters, cleaning out gutters, etc., and changing smoke detector batteries, whether they need it or not.
- Anytime you or one of your staff performs any visit to the unit, make sure the person checks to make sure the smoke detector is working. If the smoke detector is not working, be sure to repair it.
- Have your lease require the resident to call you if the smoke detector is not working properly. Inform your resident that if you should find during your own inspection that the smoke detectors are missing or have been tampered with, the resident may be fined for the repair and replacements costs.
- Install a smoke detector that uses a 10 year lithium battery. They are a bit more expensive, but they are definitely worth it. Smoke detector models are available that are a CO and smoke detector combination unit.
- Install a hard-wired smoke detector that only needs a battery for power outage back-up. While the wiring is somewhat expensive to initially install, most smoke detectors come with a clip to install the 110 volt line. Check with your electrician for more information.
- Avoid the low cost and expensive smoke detectors. The cheap smoke detectors are just that. They will not last very long and they break relatively easily. The expensive smoke detectors are just more expensive, and in fact are generally considered less reliable, less durable and give off more false alarms than the mid cost brands.
- Replace smoke detectors at least every five years. With technological advances, significant improvements have been made to the design and function of smoke detectors recently. Newer designs are much less apt to malfunction or give off false alarms. In addition, their performance does deteriorate over time due to nicotine, cockroaches, paint and other environmental conditions. Some sensors get so plugged up over time that there is no way they will ever work when they are truly needed during a fire.

Do the right thing and be diligent on making sure these issues are addressed.

