

Can Someone Let Me In To Put Out the Fire?! (The Knox Box Entry System)

By Paul Radomski, Fire Inspector

A PARAMEDIC UNIT IS DISPATCHED TO A CALL FOR A "MAN HAVING DIFFICULTY BREATHING." Half way to the call, the dispatcher informs the responding unit that the man has quit breathing. The death clock starts ticking. Gotta hurry. Paramedics know that after four minutes without heart and lung functions brain cells begin to die, causing irreversible damage. They arrive within three minutes. Great! There's still time. Loaded with their life saving equipment, they arrive at the entrance to an apartment building with a large security gate. "Squad 1 to dispatch, call back the reporting party and have them buzz us in". In her panic-stricken haste to summon help, the man's wife leaves the phone off the hook. "The line is busy, Squad 1 ". Grabbing a pry bar off their rig, the paramedics take an extra two minutes to force open the gate. They manage to save the man, who now resides in a convalescent home, facing a long, long road to recovery.

Absent the security gate, this man's outcome may have been more favorable. But Americans have the right to guard their property against unwanted intruders, so the security gate becomes a necessary tool. And the Fire Department respects that right. But, as emergency service providers to the public, we have the right to require the installation of any device that assists us in gaining entrance to a secured building. Enter the Knox Box.

Knox Boxes, known generically as key boxes or lock boxes, are like miniature vaults that only the Fire Department has the key to open. These keys are carried by the Captain of each fire apparatus, by the paramedic squads, and by each Fire Inspector. Possession of these keys is strictly controlled. The Knox Company is the only manufacturer approved by the Santa Monica Fire Department to provide key boxes for buildings within the city. Sure, there are other key boxes available out there, but most are of an inferior quality that can be easily broken into or stolen. In the thirty years that Knox Boxes have been required, not a single one has been broken into or stolen. The inspection report will state which key or keys will need to be provided by the building owner for placement into the Knox Box.

Most owners of apartment buildings with security gates understand the need for installing a Knox Box. Another issue that requires the installation of a Knox Box has to do with the Fire Inspectors ability to inspect beyond locked doors and gates that lead to rooms with heat-producing appliances or in gaining access to secured parking areas.

"You want me to put a Knox Box by my locked laundry room door? That's the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard!" In that context, I suppose it does sound rather ludicrous. Most laundry rooms contain not only heat generating dryers, but water heaters as well. A fire inspection is not complete without the ability to physically see the walls and ceilings of these rooms. I have been amazed by conditions I have found in some laundry rooms. A couple of the ones I have seen had no ceiling at all! Just bare wood frame with no protective barrier such as drywall, and a tenant living right above. Imagine a fire in that laundry room. It can spread to the whole building in a matter of minutes.

Another hazard that we look for is excessive lint accumulation behind washers and dryers. People think that because their dryers are attached to an exhaust-venting duct there should be no accumulation of lint except what is scraped out of the lint trap in the front of the dryer. Next time you're down in the laundry room, take a look behind washer and dryer. Not only will you find the proverbial lost sock, you may be amazed by the amount of lint accumulated back there. By the way, the only way to nullify the requirement for a laundry room Knox Box is to simply remove the lockable entry device.

Most handymen can install a Knox Box. They should be mounted five to six feet above the ground (about eye level) and should be firmly attached to a solid surface on either side of the entrance where it is requested to be installed.

An alternative to the Knox Box is the Knox Key Switch. These will be required in buildings where the only locked entrance on the premises is the front door or gate. The key switch is used in conjunction with an electronic entry system such as a Syntex or Door King. The switch is mounted to the touch pad panel and is wired to the same relay that "buzzes" the door open. It is activated by the same key we use to open a Knox Box.

Fire Inspectors are sincerely interested in not causing too great an economic impact on a building owner as a result of violations found during a fire and life safety inspection. When security gates obstruct the Fire Department's ability to do their job in life threatening situations where seconds can literally count, the cost of a lock box is minimal when compared to the risk of a delayed response to a fire or medical emergency.

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