

Egress Windows and Emergency Escape

Many older rural houses do not have proper egress windows. When major remodeling is completed on a house, consideration should be given to installing such windows. Unfortunately, when many upstairs bedroom windows are replaced, smaller windows for more energy efficiency rather than proper egress windows are installed. Below is a discussion on the proper sizing of egress windows. You will note that there are different size egress window requirements for different places in the home. There is further information on egress windows on the link “Related Issues” entitled “Building inspections”.

“Posted by Sean O’Hara • August 23, 2011

The International Residential Code spells out a number of code requirements for egress windows and emergency escape in houses and other residential buildings.

First, you’re required to have at least one egress window or door in a basement and in every bedroom. If you have one in a bedroom in the basement then you don’t have to have an additional one elsewhere in the basement.

The bottom of the window (sill height) can’t be more than 44” above the floor. The opening must be at least 5.7 sf unless its on the ground floor where it only has to be 5 sf. The minimum opening also needs to be at least 24” tall and at least 20” wide. You also have to be able to open the window from inside without any special keys or hardware.

If you have bars or covers over the window or window well it is allowable, but it has to be operable from the inside without a key.

If your egress window is below grade you need a window well with a footprint of at least 9 sf and measuring 36” minimum in both directions. If it is more than 44” deep you need a permanent ladder with rungs at least 12” wide, no more than 18” of height between rungs and projecting 3” to 6” off the wall.

If the window is under a deck or a porch, you have to be able to open the window fully and have at least a 36” path out from under the deck.

If you happen to be designing a multifamily dwelling there are some exceptions involving sprinklers and corridors along with fire ratings but where you use egress windows the constraints are basically the same.

Of course the question that usually comes up is “why does the opening need to be so big, I’ll get out of a tiny window if there is a fire.” The explanation that I’ve heard is that it has more to do with the size of an opening needed for someone to assist you in escape. The firemen need a bit of maneuvering room to haul you out.

To help you in your design, most manufacturers list which of their windows meet the egress requirements. There can be a bit of variation depending on frame sizes and hardware differences from one manufacturer to another.”



This 1970's home was not built to code. As a result, it now has many problems:

- There are two bedrooms above the garage. None of the windows from the two bedrooms are egress windows.
- The shingles are deteriorating and in need of replacement.
- This is interior grade particle board with a water based glue that surrounds the garage door. It is new but soon will deteriorate.
- The concrete by the front door slopes toward the house. This helps keep the basement wet.
- The replacement windows installed on the garage and home are recessed so that water can get behind the siding.
- There are no vents to let the air in or out of the attic. This could cause early deterioration of the shingles and be another cause of moisture in the walls.
- The particle board siding was brought down directly unto the bricks by the front door. This rotting siding is also allowing moisture into the walls.
- There are numerous places for mold to grow in this home.