

What the Code Dictates

In the 1998 *International One- and Two-Family Dwelling Code*, which is the standard building code for a number of jurisdictions, you will find the following language: "Emergency escape required. Every sleeping room shall have at least one operable window or exterior door approved for emergency escape of rescue. The units must be operable from the inside to a full clear opening without the use of a key, tool or special knowledge."

Let's break that down a little. First of all, there is the term "sleeping room". This obviously refers to bedrooms, but it can also extend to any room where someone regularly sleeps, such a loft, converted basement or other room.

Within that sleeping room, there needs to be at least one window or door that opens to the outside. Remember that a door that opens into a hall or into another room before providing access to the exterior of the house does not meet the code—it must open directly to the exterior.

Also notice the provision that says the door or window must be able to be opened *without* a key, tool or special knowledge. That means that the door can't have a deadbolt on it that has to be operated with a key from inside. It also can't have locks or other security devices on the inside of it that require a special tool, a specific combination or any other special knowledge to be able to unlatch and open it in an emergency.

If, as is the case with most bedrooms, you are relying on a window as a means of emergency exit, then at least one window in the room needs to meet or exceed some very specific requirements. For most codes, this includes the height of the window and well as its clear opening size.

For windows, the 1998 *International One- and Two-Family Dwelling Code* further requires that the sill height be not more than 44 inches above the floor, and that "emergency escape or rescue windows from sleeping rooms" have a minimum net clear opening of 5.7 square feet, or a minimum of 5 square feet for grade floor windows. Additionally, the minimum net clear openings for that escape window need to be at least 22 inches high and 20 inches wide.

Also, look at the term "operable from the inside to a full clear opening." The meaning is obvious, but in reality it may not always be the case. First of all, the window or door needs to operate from the inside. Simply put, one person needs to be able to open it easily from inside, without any assistance from someone on the exterior of the house.

Finally, "full clear opening" means that there can't be anything that prevents that window or door from swinging or sliding all the way open. That could include things like landscaping that prevents a casement window from opening all the

way, debris or stored items that block the full swing of a door, interior decorations that permanently block part of a window, window air conditioners that are installed in the only egress window, or dozens of other possible scenarios. This also applies to "bars, grills, covers and screens" over egress windows, all of which need to be able to be released from the inside without the use of a key, tool or special knowledge.

The code also specifies "the net opening dimensions required by this section shall be obtained by the normal operation of the window from the inside." Note the term "normal operation," which means that you need to be able to slide or swing the window open in the manner that the manufacturer originally intended. It does not include breaking out enough glass or enough of the frame to achieve required opening size.