



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Mommy May I

A common phrase used by young children is “daddy can I?” This is followed by a stated desire to do something, get something or experience something. A common response to that inquiry is “ask your mother”. I never quite figured out why most adult males are concerned about granting permission to a young child, but more often than not, mother gets to be the one to make the decision.

I draw a little bit of analogy between that phenomenon and the whole idea of issuing permits in the fire service for people to carry out what might be a dangerous act. When people come to the fire department wanting to do something unusual instead of giving them outright permission, we request them to complete a document that may have to be approved by someone else. Standard terminology for this is called “permitting”. As a member of a fire prevention bureau you have to be knowledgeable of when and where these permits are being required and moreover you have to be very knowledgeable about what they actually allow to go on that is out of the ordinary.

At the outset of this discussion we need to admit that giving someone permission (a permit) means we are allowing them to do something that must have some degree of extraordinary risk associated with it. The reason we want to know about it in advance is to establish conditions. A permit, therefore, is used to give someone the opportunity to create a hazardous situation under specific conditions.

There are two implications for fire inspectors from my perspective. The first is the amount of control and observation that needs to go on in the permitting process to assure that those conditions are accurately monitored. The other is to be able to identify conditions in the field in which people are doing processes for which they should have a permit and have not applied for one. Let’s talk about the first one first. The international codes are pretty specific about permitting. If you go to the article it spells out the different types of activities very clearly. Generally the people who are professionals in conducting these types of activities are extremely familiar with the permitting process and wouldn’t violate it if they had the chance. The permit itself requires that a person provide a great deal of detailed information that should be documented and maintained by the department. You are granting someone permission to do something that has a potential of something going wrong. Your documentation had better be thorough and it better be on file.

On the other hand there are novices in some occupancy’s that believe that they can get around from the permitting process by ignoring its existence. These people can often be observed working on the periphery of activity in a community and need to be identified as quickly as possible. Operating without a permit should be the basis for a stop order document. If you catch someone doing the things that are supposed to be permitted and they have ignored that, it means that they are probably ignoring the safety procedures that are inherent in it.



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The term permitted activity does not include reaching common sense and/or exceeding specifications of good fire safety. Especially when you are dealing with such things like hot work in which an inadvertent admission could result in a catastrophic fire. A fire inspector who has a permitted activity going on in his or her area of responsibility should become extremely familiar with the conditions around that permit to avoid any possibility that something could go awry.