

# SECONDARY SUITE STANDARDS

A secondary suite is a self-contained dwelling unit that is part of a house containing not more than two dwelling units (including the secondary suite) and any common spaces such as common storage, common service rooms, common laundry facilities or common areas used for exit.

Secondary suites are typically created within an existing single dwelling unit, (house) either constructed as an addition to an existing house or incorporated during the construction of a new house. A secondary suite may have more than one storey and may be on the same level as the principal dwelling unit of the house or be above or below it.

Examples of buildings where secondary suites are permitted include individual detached houses, semi-detached houses (half of a double) and freehold row houses. Secondary suites are also permitted where the secondary suite is located in a portion of a building.

Where a building has multiple occupancies, the secondary suite can only be created in a portion of the building that is of residential occupancy.

Apartment buildings have more than two dwelling units and are therefore not permitted to have secondary suites.

A secondary suite is only permitted where approved by the local authority, in accordance with municipal land use bylaws.

## Planning

The costs to develop a secondary suite will vary depending on the conditions of the home, the size and extent of the development and type of changes required to comply with minimum code requirements. Secondary suites are permitted only in specific single-family homes in accordance with municipal zoning bylaws.

**IMPORTANT:** Check with your municipality on the zoning and development bylaws in your area to determine which areas are zoned to permit secondary suites.



# SAFETY TIPS

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Before homeowners decide to proceed with renovating their homes to incorporate a new or upgraded secondary suite, they should approach their local municipal administration office. They should discuss their plan with a Development Officer and Building Safety Codes Officer and obtain the necessary information regarding permit requirements (e.g., building, gas and electrical work), zoning and other construction considerations.

### BASIC REQUIREMENTS

The following is an outline of the applicable building code requirements that need to be considered when developing a new or upgraded secondary suite.

If you need information on specific upgrades for an existing suite, please contact your local municipality.

- 1. The minimum ceiling height for living spaces in a secondary suite is 1.95 m (78").**

This requirement is in line with current acceptable practice for unfinished basements. This height makes it feasible for most existing homes to be adapted for secondary suites. For existing secondary suites, the minimum ceiling height may be less than 1.95 m (78"), subject to evaluation by a safety codes officer.
- 2. Provide smoke-tight walls, ceiling, and exits by the use of ½-inch drywall.**

This requirement is intended to provide smoke-tight barriers between suites to allow occupants of either unit time to evacuate before fire spreads between units. When the exit from a basement suite goes through a main floor vestibule to the outdoors, adequate smoke/fire protection to the exit walls and ceiling is necessary for occupants to evacuate safely.
- 3. A secondary suite must have a direct exit to the outdoors.**

This requirement is an essential safety feature to provide a primary means of evacuating occupants from the secondary suite in the event of fire or other emergency. It is acceptable to have an exit from a basement suite with stairs leading from the basement to a main floor vestibule with a doorway leading directly to the outside. However, the walls and ceiling for such exits must be provided with protection by 12.7 mm (½-inch) gypsum board from the effects of fire to allow occupants adequate time to evacuate.
- 4. Each bedroom in a secondary suite must have at least one window for emergency escape during a fire.**

Windows in bedrooms are intended to provide an alternate means for escape during a fire emergency. A secondary suite may contain a number of bedrooms, and each bedroom must have at least one window with an unobstructed opening size of not less than 0.35 m<sup>2</sup> (543 in<sup>2</sup>) and no dimension less than 380 mm (15"). If a window opens into a window-well, a clearance of at least 760 mm (30") between the window



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and the wall of the window-well is required. The bedroom window must be able to be opened from the inside without the use of tools or technical knowledge and maintain the required opening during an emergency without the need for additional support.

(Please also see Alberta Municipal Affairs FAQ requirements for bedroom windows.)

### 5. Homes containing a secondary suite must have interconnected smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms installed to cover both dwellings.

Smoke alarms conforming to CAN/ULC-S531 “Smoke-Alarms” must be located in both the main dwelling and the secondary suite and be installed in conformance of CAN/ULC-S553 “Installation of Smoke-Alarms” and the National Building Code-Alberta Edition.

Smoke alarms in a house with a secondary suite shall be interconnected so that the activation of any one smoke alarm causes all smoke alarms within the house with a secondary suite to sound. **Smoke alarms are required in each bedroom and hallway.**

Carbon monoxide (CO) alarms conforming to CAN/CSA-6.19 “Residential Carbon Monoxide Alarming Devices” must be installed in a house with a secondary suite including their common spaces and shall be interconnected so that the activation of any one CO alarm causes all CO alarms within the house with a secondary suite including their common spaces to sound. CO alarms are required inside each bedroom or outside each bedroom (within 5 m of each bedroom door) and measured following corridors and doorways.

(Please also see Smoke-Alarms for your Home Brochure.)

### 6. Gas-fired furnaces and water heaters need to be enclosed in a room with fire-protected walls and ceiling by the use of ½-inch drywall.

Allowing the location of the above appliances in an open living area is a dangerous due to possible fire (equipment malfunction) and health (carbon monoxide poisoning from the escape of flue-gas) hazards associated with such equipment. A furnace room needs to be provided with 12.7 mm (½-inch) drywall applied to both sides of the walls and the ceiling to produce a smoke-tight barrier between it and the dwelling units or common spaces.

### 7. New secondary suites shall be served by an independent heating and ventilation system.

In secondary suite construction, independent ventilation systems are required. Previous fire studies have demonstrated smoke migration between a secondary suite and the main dwelling can occur quickly when a common ductwork system serves both areas.



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Undesirable air contaminants (e.g., cigarette smoke or cooking fumes) are also transmitted more quickly if free air exchange between the suites is permitted through common ductwork.

Homeowners are encouraged to investigate heating and ventilation options with local heating services companies to minimize costs.

- 8. Doors in smoke-tight barriers shall be at least a solid core wood 45 mm (1-3/4") thick and have a self-closing device.**

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### Contact

#### **Community and Technical Support branch of Municipal Affairs:**

Hours: 8:15 am to 4:30 pm (open Monday to Friday, closed statutory holidays)

Toll free: 1-866-421-6929

Email: [safety.services@gov.ab.ca](mailto:safety.services@gov.ab.ca)

#### **Safety Codes Council:**

Toll free: 1-888-413-0099 (within Alberta)

Email: [sccinfo@safetycodes.ab.ca](mailto:sccinfo@safetycodes.ab.ca)

Web: [safetycodes.ab.ca](http://safetycodes.ab.ca)

#### **Alberta Safety Codes Authority:**

Toll free: 1-888-413-0099 (within Alberta)

Email: [askasca@safetycodes.ab.ca](mailto:askasca@safetycodes.ab.ca)

