

Care Facilities - Six or Fewer Clients

2025 California Building Code/CFC - Group R-3.1 residentially based care facilities

Purpose. This handout is intended for applicants and operators of licensed residential care facilities serving six or fewer clients in a dwelling. Fire and life-safety requirements depend on the facility license, client mobility, bedridden status, building configuration and fire-protection features.

1. Occupancy Classification and Licensing

Many residentially based 24-hour care facilities serving six or fewer clients are classified as Group R-3.1 under the California Building Code. Examples can include adult residential facilities, group homes, residential care facilities for the elderly and other licensed protective-social-care facilities.

The licensing agency and the fire enforcing agency must agree on the facility type and the ambulatory, nonambulatory or bedridden status of clients. Those classifications directly affect exiting, doors, alarms and sprinkler requirements.

Code reference: 2025 CBC Chapter 3 and §435; 2025 CFC Appendix Chapter 4 §435

2. Fire Clearance Process

- California law provides for fire-clearance preinspection and final inspection for community care, residential care and child-care facilities.
- The prospective licensee should identify the exact license category and client characteristics before the fire inspection so the correct requirements can be applied.
- Required corrections must be completed before final fire clearance is issued. The fire clearance is separate from State licensing approval.

Code reference: 2025 CFC §§1.11.4.4-1.11.4.5 and applicable Health and Safety Code provisions

3. Means of Egress

- Required exits must remain continuously available, readily openable and free of storage or obstructions.
- Exit arrangements for R-3.1 facilities vary with the number and mobility status of clients and the story on which clients are housed.
- Facilities housing bedridden clients have additional direct-exit, door and protection requirements. In an unsprinklered R-3.1 facility housing one bedridden client, the client sleeping room requires a direct exit to the exterior under the special-care provisions.
- Locks, latches and security features on required egress doors must allow the type of operation required for the licensed occupancy and client population.

Code reference: 2025 CBC §435; 2025 CFC Appendix Chapter 4 §435.8; CFC Chapter 10

4. Smoke Alarms and Notification

- Smoke alarms are required in the locations specified for R-3.1 facilities and must be maintained in operating condition.
- Where a facility houses a bedridden client, smoke alarms are required to receive primary power from building wiring when served by a commercial source, include battery backup and be interconnected so activation of one produces a distinctive alarm throughout the facility.
- The alarm signal for the bedridden-client provision must be audible throughout the facility at least 15 dB above ambient noise level.
- Facilities housing persons who are hearing impaired require notification appliances for the hearing impaired in accordance with NFPA 72 as required by the CFC.

Code reference: 2025 CFC §§907.2.11.2.3 and 907.5.2.3.4

5. Automatic Sprinklers and Fire Protection

- Automatic sprinkler requirements are determined by the applicable Group R provisions, the facility type and the building conditions. Existing conversions can have specific exceptions or upgrade paths.
- Required sprinkler systems must be maintained in service and inspected/tested in accordance with California requirements and the applicable NFPA standard.

- Portable fire extinguishers are required in Group R-3.1 occupancies. Selection, number and placement are based on CFC Section 906 and California Title 19. An attached garden hose can be accepted in lieu of one or more extinguishers only when the enforcing agency approves it.

Code reference: 2025 CFC §§903, 906 and 907; CCR Title 19, Division 1

6. Common Inspection Items

- Approved address visible from the street.
- Required exits and paths free of obstructions.
- Required smoke alarms and alarm devices tested and operational.
- Fire extinguishers properly installed, serviced and accessible.
- Electrical panels and wiring maintained without hazardous conditions.
- Combustible storage controlled and kept away from ignition sources.
- Heating equipment, water heaters and other hazards protected from client contact where required.
- Sprinkler valves, alarm equipment and other fire-protection features accessible and maintained.
- Client bedrooms and exit arrangements match the approved fire clearance and licensed ambulatory status.

7. Changes That Require Re-Evaluation

Contact the licensing agency and fire enforcing agency before changing the number of clients, client ambulatory status, sleeping-room locations, floor level used for clients, building layout or fire-protection systems. A facility that was compliant for ambulatory clients can require substantial changes before accepting nonambulatory or bedridden clients.

Primary References

- 2025 California Building Code §435 - Licensed 24-hour care facilities in Groups R-2.1, R-3.1 and R-4
- 2025 California Fire Code Appendix Chapter 4 §435 and Chapter 9
- 2025 California Fire Code §907.2.11.2.3 and §907.5.2.3.4
- California Code of Regulations, Title 19, Division 1
- NFPA 72 and applicable sprinkler standards as referenced by the adopted California codes

This handout is an informational summary. It does not replace the adopted code, approved plans, permit conditions, State licensing requirements, or determinations of the fire code official. Project-specific requirements may vary.