

## Secondary Suite Standards

### Alberta's Safety System

Alberta Municipal Affairs works in partnership with the Safety Codes Council, municipalities, corporations, agencies, and other organizations, to deliver effective community-focused public safety programs and services to Albertans.

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.

### Importance of permits

The *Safety Codes Act* requires that permits in Alberta be obtained prior to commencing work on any buildings covered by the Alberta Building and Fire Codes, the Canadian Electrical Code, the Gas Code, or the National Plumbing Code.

Permits are part of a process to access compliance to a minimum standard of construction safety for the benefit of all Albertans. If construction projects are undertaken without required permits, the owner may be subject to penalties and extra costs incurred to bring a project into compliance.

As the property owner, you are responsible to obtain all necessary permits. A contractor can look after this on your behalf; however, you should specify in writing, who will get the required permits. Some jurisdictions may require a letter of authorization before a contractor can apply for permit(s) on your behalf.

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

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.

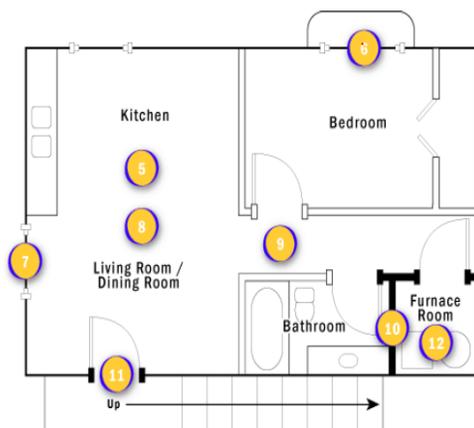
### Basic Requirements

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.



### Benefits of getting a permit

When you get a permit, certified safety codes officers (inspectors) will:

- give you expert advice,
- review your plans to find any potential problems,
- inspect your project, and
- make sure your project meets the Alberta Building Code.

Making changes at the planning stage can save you money, rather than making costly corrections after construction. Certified safety codes officers will give you an inspection report(s) and follow-up on deficiencies to make sure your project is safe and in compliance.

### Where do you get a permit?

Permits are available through municipalities that administer the *Safety Codes Act* and through agencies that provide inspection services on behalf of municipalities or the province. If you don't know whether your municipality issues permits, contact the Alberta Safety Codes Authority (ASCA) at 1-888-413-0099 or visit [safetycodes.ab.ca/ASCA](http://safetycodes.ab.ca/ASCA).

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### 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 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. During an emergency, the window must be able to remain open without the need for additional support.

*(Please also see Alberta Municipal Affairs Smoke-Alarm Home Installation and Carbon Monoxide Alarm Home Installation Brochure.)*

### 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 Alberta Building Code. Smoke alarms in a house with a secondary suite shall be wired so that the activation of any one smoke alarm causes all smoke alarms within the house. **Smoke alarms are required in each bedroom and hallway.**

### Applying for a building permit

When applying for a building permit, you must submit the following information to your local authority:

- details of the project or occupancy to be covered by the permit.
- details of the land on which the project will be located, including a description that will easily identify and locate the building lot.
- plans, specifications and other documents showing, in detail, the proposed occupancy of all parts of the building, state the value of the proposed project.
- state the names, addresses and phone numbers of the project owner, designer and contractor.

### Hire qualified tradespeople

Specific trades such as electricians, plumbers and gasfitters must be certified to work in Alberta. To find out if the tradespeople you are hiring need to be certified in Alberta or to verify an individual's status, you may contact *The Apprenticeship and Industry Training* office by calling 310-0000.

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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. Alarms shall be hard-wired so that the activation of any one CO alarm causes all CO alarms within the house 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.**

**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 these in an open living area is 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.**

For pre-existing secondary suites, the use of a single heating and ventilation system to serve both the main dwelling and the secondary suite may be acceptable under the Alberta Fire Code. In new construction, independent heating and 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. 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 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.**

### More information:

#### Alberta Municipal Affairs

Community & Technical Support  
16<sup>th</sup> Floor, Commerce Place  
10155 - 102 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4L4

 Toll-free: 1-866-421-6929  
 [safety.services@gov.ab.ca](mailto:safety.services@gov.ab.ca)  
 [municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca](http://municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca)

#### Safety Codes Council

Suite 500  
10405 Jasper Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3N4

 Toll-free within Alberta:  
1-888-413-0099  
1-888-424-5134  
 [webmaster@safetycodes.ab.ca](mailto:webmaster@safetycodes.ab.ca)  
 [safetycodes.ab.ca](http://safetycodes.ab.ca)

#### Alberta Safety Codes Authority (ASCA)

 Toll-free within Alberta:  
1-888-413-0099  
 [askasca@safetycodes.ab.ca](mailto:askasca@safetycodes.ab.ca)

### Call (or click) before you dig!

**Alberta One Call** will locate utility lines on your property. Call or click before you start any project that involves digging in your yard. Alberta One Call will locate gas, water, electricity, drainage, telephone and cable TV lines. Allow at least two full working days for Alberta One Call to locate your utility lines.

*These brochures may be updated periodically. They have no legal status and cannot be used as an official interpretation of the various bylaws, codes and regulations currently in effect.*