

LASALLE BANK FIRE, CHICAGO: DECEMBER 6, 2004

On Monday, December 6, 2004, an electrical fire broke out on the 29th floor of the LaSalle Bank Building in Chicago's Downtown Loop at about 6:30 PM. Burning for more than five hours, the 5-11 and 3 Special Alarm fire reached temperatures in excess of 2,000° and spread to the 30th floor of the building, mainly due to the absence of sprinklers. More than 400 firefighters and one-third of the Chicago Fire Department's apparatus were on-scene, and nearly 25 suburban communities responded with mutual aid support.

As the largest high-rise fire in Illinois history, the LaSalle Bank Fire could have been a repeat of the tragedy at the Cook County Administration Building Fire one year earlier, but instead the outcome was far more positive. In a stroke of good luck for firefighters, the design of the building contributed to smooth fire fighting operations. Firefighters took advantage of the tiered construction of the building by setting up on the roofs of some of the building's lower tiers. These roofs, just a few floors below the flames, gave firefighters the perfect perch for spraying water into the windows of the burning 29th floor. The positive ending to the LaSalle Bank Fire was not just due to the fortunate design of the building, however, but was instead a direct result of the dramatic steps taken by the Chicago Fire Department to improve high-rise operations following the Cook County Administration Building Fire.

After arriving on-scene, the Chicago Fire Department began immediate evacuation and rescue operations, as Rapid Ascent Teams conducted floor-by-floor searches of the LaSalle Bank Building. Even though it was after normal operating hours, about 500 workers were still at work in the 45-story building. Remembering the lessons from one year earlier, the commanding officers designated one stairwell for use in evacuation operations, while another was reserved for firefighter use. In addition, rescue personnel were in close contact with 911 operators, who kept building occupants on the line so that rescuers could know the exact locations of trapped victims. Also contributing to smooth evacuations, stairwell doors in the building had been left unlocked and the fire alarm announcements gave clear instructions to the building occupants, who knew how to react because of frequent fire and evacuation drills recently mandated by the city.

The LaSalle Bank Fire proved to be as much of a turning point for high-rise fire and rescue operations as the Cook County Administration Building Fire one year earlier, only this time the results were undeniably better. While more than 30 people, mostly firefighters, were sent to hospitals for minor injuries, there were no fatalities. Moreover, the Chicago Fire Department's new High-Rise Incident Command Order, enacted only two months earlier, proved effective in directing firefighters and commanders during the blaze. Citywide training in high-rise fire fighting and evacuation provided by the Illinois Fire Service Institute also contributed to the successful fire fighting operations.