Decoding Building and Life Safety Codes

How building codes are developed and how they are revised may vary from state to state. The most common method of developing and updating codes is when a state adopts one or more of the International Code Council (ICC) codes, typically referred to as the I-codes. The ICC is a membership association made up of mainly government building officials and fire prevention officials that develop the codes used to construct residential and commercial buildings such as single-family homes, apartment buildings, education, institutional, mercantile and assembly occupancies to mention a few. The ICC publishes a wide variety of I-codes such as:

- International Residential Code (IRC)
- International Building Code (IBC)
- International Mechanical Code (IMC)
- International Fire Code (IFC)

The above I-codes are updated by the ICC membership every three years. Many states or municipalities will adopt by reference one or several of the above I-codes. It is common for states or municipalities to make amendments to the I-codes either by removing or adding different requirements. Some states will begin adopting the latest edition of the I-codes 6 to 12 months after they are published. However, many states are still using the 2000 or 2003 editions of the I-codes.

Another way codes change is through the legislative process. A good example of this is the how carbon monoxide detection became mandatory in one- and two family dwellings became a mandate prior to the 2009 IRC. Many states passed laws authoring the state fire marshal or building code commission to promulgate rules to implement the requirements of the law.

The National Fire Protection Administration (NFPA) typically publishes installation standards such as NFPA 72, *The National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code*, and NFPA 720, *Standard for the Installation of Carbon Monoxide Detection and Warning Equipment*. NFPA publishes several building codes as well, such as NFPA 101, *Life Safety Code*, or NFPA 5000, *Building Construction and Safety Code.*

A "code," such as the I-codes or NFPA 101 or NFPA 5000, specifies WHEN the life safety system, or portions thereof, and any associated services are required. Whereas, an "installation standard" sets forth the requirements as to HOW a life safety system is to be installed, tested, inspected, maintained and monitored.