

Certificate of Occupancy Information Sheet

A Certificate of Occupancy (CO) is an essential document issued by the Department of Licenses and Inspections that confirms a building's compliance with applicable codes and its suitability for occupancy based on its intended use. Whether you're a property owner, developer, or tenant, understanding when and how to obtain a CO is critical for legal occupancy and avoiding potential fines or delays.

This Information Sheet addresses key questions about Certificates of Occupancy to help you navigate the process effectively.

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Understanding the Certificate of Occupancy

What is a Certificate of Occupancy?

A **Certificate of Occupancy (CO)** is a formal written approval issued by the Building Code Official, confirming that a specific structure complies with all applicable building codes and is safe for occupancy. It verifies that the building meets structural, electrical, plumbing, mechanical, and fire safety requirements in effect at the time the approved use was established.

Once issued, a CO remains valid for the building or space unless the use is modified or expanded. A new CO is not required when ownership, tenancy, or residency changes—provided the approved use remains the same.

It is important not to confuse a CO with a **Zoning Permit**, which governs how land may be used, or a **Property Certification**, which reflects the most recent approved zoning records on file with the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I).

Do all buildings require a Certificate of Occupancy?

Pursuant to Section A-106.1 of the Administrative Code:

A **Certificate of Occupancy (CO)** is required under the following circumstances:

1. **Construction of a new building** in accordance with the Residential or Building Code.
2. **Construction of an addition** to an existing building, in compliance with the Existing Building Code. This includes additions to residential buildings that result in four or more stories.
3. **Change in Occupancy Classification**, as defined by the Existing Building Code. This includes:
 - Transitions within the same occupancy group (e.g., from A-3, such as an art gallery, to A-2, such as a restaurant).
 - Conversion of a one-family dwelling to a two-family dwelling in buildings constructed after 2004.
4. **Relocation of a building**, subject to the applicable requirements of the Existing Building Code.
5. **Interior alterations** to an existing building or space that affect minimum egress requirements or fire protection systems.
6. **Change in intensity of use within an existing occupancy classification**. Examples include:
 - Adding dwelling units to an existing R-2 (multifamily) building
 - Substantially increasing the occupant load in an A-2 occupancy (e.g., restaurant or nightclub)

Exception: A Certificate of Occupancy is **not required** for additions or alterations to existing **one- or two-family dwellings**.

Additionally, any **building constructed or use established after June 1969** must have a Certificate of Occupancy (formerly known as a *Statement of Occupancy*), **with the exception of one- and two-family dwellings**.

Buildings or uses lawfully established prior to this date are referred to as 'uncertified' buildings. Refer to [Code Bulletin No. A-1301](#) for more information on uncertified buildings.

Does my use constitute a change in occupancy?

Chapter 3 of the Building Code classifies building uses based on the nature of associated hazards and the level of risk posed to occupants.

It is considered a change of occupancy when the use of a space changes from one use group to another OR there is a change in intensity of use. Refer to [Appendix A](#) for the Building Code use classifications.

The table below shows examples for reference:

Existing Use	New Use	Change of Occupancy?
Shoe store (Group M)	Clothing store (Group M)	No
Lawyer office (Group B)	Retail store (Group M)	Yes, a new C.O. is required
Sit-down restaurant with 30 seats (Group B)	Sit-down restaurant with 50 seats (Group A-2)	Yes, a new C.O. is required
Three-unit apartment building (Group R-2)	Six-unit apartment building (Group R-2)	Yes, the a new C.O. is required. The use group is the same but intensity has increased.
Single-family dwelling (Group R-3)	Three-family dwelling (Group R-2)	Yes, a new C.O. is required
Warehouse (Group S-1)	Retail stores (Group M)	Yes, a new C.O. is required

Obtaining a Certificate of Occupancy

How do I determine if my building has a CO or alternate proof of legal occupancy?

Because **Certificates of Occupancy (COs)** were not required prior to 1969—and due to evolving record-keeping practices by the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I)—the method for verifying a building’s approved use depends on the year the use was established.

➤ Uses Established Prior to 1969

For buildings or uses established before 1969, verification may rely on alternative forms of documentation, such as:

- Historical zoning or permit records
- Microfilm or archived permit records
- Historical imagery, original floor plans, or architectural drawings

➤ Uses Established Between 1969 and 2000

During this period, Certificates of Occupancy became required, but formats and storage methods varied. Verification may include:

- A Certificate of Occupancy or Statement of Occupancy
- Historic zoning records, property certifications, or license records from L&I
- Microfilm or archived permit records
- Historical imagery or original floor plans

➤ Uses Established from 2000 to Present

L&I has complete records for this time period and, therefore, will only accept:

- A Certificate of Occupancy

➤ Accessing Records Through Atlas

The City of Philadelphia’s property information portal, **Atlas**, provides access to a wide range of historical and current property data, including:



- **Zoning Archives:** Complete zoning histories dating back to the 1930s, including COs and Statements of Occupancy through 2006
- **Permits:** Construction permit records dating back to 2006
- **Historical & Aerial Imagery:** Tools include 360-degree street-level views, bird's-eye aerials, and historical maps dating back to the 1800s

Archived records not available through Atlas may be obtained from the **City Archives**.

Important Notes

L&I may require additional documentation to confirm that a use was legally established and continuously maintained. If verification cannot be confirmed through the above methods, issuance of a **new Certificate of Occupancy** may be required.

While L&I may accept alternate records to demonstrate legal occupancy of an uncertified building, you may need a new Certificate of Occupancy for other purposes (i.e. State licensure, lender requirement). Refer to [Code Bulletin No. A-1301](#) for more information on uncertified buildings.

How do I obtain a copy of a CO?

You can research the permit history and the Certificate of Occupancy information using [Atlas.phila.gov](https://atlas.phila.gov).

Where available, you can request copies of the existing Certificate of Occupancy from the Department. Visit phila.gov/li for information on [accessing a copy of an existing CO](#).

How do I obtain a new Certificate of Occupancy

All [Building Permits](#) for new construction, additions, and for building permit applications that contain applicable alteration to existing structures will automatically contain the certificate of occupancy with the building permit.

If no work is proposed then you will need to file a new [Certificate of Occupancy Permit](#).

If you are legalizing or establishing a new use, it is recommended that you consult with a licensed design professional before filing your application to identify any potential building upgrades (i.e. fire sprinklers, number of exits, accessible features, plumbing fixtures, etc.) that may require a Building Permit. See the [Commercial Leasing Guide](#) for additional details.

Inspection Procedures

I have a Certificate of Occupancy permit, what are my next steps?

Once you have a Certificate of Occupancy Permit, you must contact your assigned inspector to arrange the inspections noted on your permit. A Certificate of Occupancy will be issued upon successful completion of the inspections.

Certificates of Occupancy for Completed Buildings

The following shall be ready, presented and completed prior to the issuance of the Certificate of Occupancy:

- a. All work has been completed in accordance with the approved permits and plans.
- b. Required certifications, such as, but not limited to, sprinkler, standpipe, fire alarm, floodplain, and special inspections have been filed. Visit [L&I certifications page](#) for a complete listing.
- c. All trade permits have had final inspections, and the work authorized has been approved.
- d. All required inspections have been successfully completed, any outstanding violations have been resolved, and all reinspection fees have been paid in full.
- e. Outstanding [Development Impact Tax](#) has been paid, if applicable.

How may I obtain a CO for my phased Core and Shell project?

A **Core and Shell** building is a completed structure in which individual commercial and/or residential tenant spaces may remain unfinished. This construction approach supports **phased development and occupancy**, allowing portions of the building to be completed and occupied without requiring full build-out of every tenant space.

While individual tenant occupancies may vary over time as spaces are fit out, the **Core and Shell permit application must identify an assumed occupancy classification**—typically the most restrictive anticipated use—in order to establish minimum code compliance and ensure appropriate life safety standards.

A **Certificate of Occupancy (CO)** for the Core and Shell will be issued once construction is complete and all required **life safety systems**, inspections, and certifications are in place.

Tenant Fit-Outs and Additional COs

- **Separate permits** are required for tenant fit outs and may be issued during or after completion of the Core and Shell.
- An individual **Certificate of Occupancy for any tenant space** will not be issued **until the Core and Shell CO has been issued**.
- A **Temporary Certificate of Occupancy (TCO)** may be granted—provided all life safety and code requirements are met—to allow occupancy of a tenant space while Core and Shell work is still ongoing.

Am I eligible to obtain a Temporary Certificate of Occupancy?

A Temporary Certificate of Occupancy is not available for single-family dwellings. Refer to the website for more information on [Temporary Certificate of Occupancy Permit](#) requirements.

What Pre-Occupancy Activity may be permitted?

Certain occupancies—such as hotels and restaurants—may conduct pre-occupancy activities like employee training before obtaining a CO or TCO provided specific criteria are met. This is typically allowed during the final phases of construction when systems are being tested and punch-list items are being completed.

Criteria for Permitting Pre-Occupancy Activities:

1. **Fire Protection Systems:** All fire protection systems must be installed and ready for testing at a minimum.
2. **Occupancy Restrictions:** During this period, only staff and employees of the operator are permitted on-site. *Public access and revenue-generating activities are strictly prohibited. A CO or TCO is required for any such activity conducted on-site, including the showing of model units to prospective buyers or tenants.*
3. **Employee Training Program:** The building owner or operator must provide an orientation and training program for employees. This program should cover building familiarization, safe use and operation of the building's life safety systems and equipment, and evacuation procedures.
4. **Notification of Life Safety System Shutdowns:** Any temporary shutdown of life safety systems must be clearly posted for employee information, indicating which systems are out of service and the anticipated duration of the shutdown.

Contact the Building Inspector directly to initiate the request.

Related FAQs

- [Personal Care Homes](#)
- [Schools](#)
- [Special Events](#)
- [Pop Up Beer Gardens](#)
- [Rental License Occupancy Requirements](#)

Appendix A

Building Code Use Classification

CLASS	GROUP
Assembly	<p>A-1: Assembly areas with fixed seating (<i>i.e. Movie theaters, Concert halls, etc</i>)</p> <p>A-2: Assembly areas intended for food and/or drink consumption (<i>i.e. Banquet Halls, Nightclubs, Restaurants and Bars, etc.</i>)</p> <p>A-3: Assembly areas for worship, recreation or amusement (<i>i.e. Exhibition halls, Funeral parlor, Libraries, etc</i>)</p> <p>A-4: Assembly areas for viewing of indoor sporting events with spectator seating (<i>i.e. Arenas, Skating rinks, etc.</i>)</p> <p>A-5: Assembly areas for participation in or viewing outdoor activities (<i>i.e. Stadiums, Amusement park structures, etc.</i>)</p> <p><i>Note: Assembly spaces for less than 50 persons are classified as a B.</i></p>
Business	B: Offices, professional or services-type transactions (<i>i.e. Banks, Barber or Beauty Shops, etc.</i>).
Educational	E: Use by six or more persons for educational purposes through the 12 th grade (<i>i.e. Elementary and high schools, daycare facilities for children over 2 ½ yrs</i>).
Factory	<p>F-1: Assembling, disassembling, fabricating, finishing, manufacturing, packaging, repair or processing operations of industrial uses with moderate hazard (<i>i.e. Aircraft, Bakeries, Clothing, Furniture, Dry cleaning, etc.</i>).</p> <p>F-2: Fabrication or manufacturing of noncombustible materials that during finishing, packing or processing do not involve a significant fire hazard (<i>i.e. Brick and masonry, Metal products, etc.</i>).</p>
High-Hazard	H1 - H5: Manufacturing, processing, generation, or storage of materials that constitute a physical or health hazard in certain quantities. <i>Group H1-H5 based on level and quantity of hazardous materials.</i>
Institutional	<p>I-1: Care or supervision of more than 16 persons, excluding staff, who reside on a 24-hour basis in a supervised environment and receive custodial care (<i>i.e. Assisted living facilities, Congregate care facilities, etc.</i>)</p> <p>I-2: Medical care on a 24-hour basis for more than five persons who are incapable of self-preservation (<i>i.e. Hospitals, Nursing</i>)</p> <p>I-3: Occupants (5 or more) under restraint (<i>i.e. jails, correctional centers</i>)</p> <p>I-4: Daycare centers where 5 or more persons are under custodial care for periods less than 24 hours.</p>
Mercantile	M: Display and sale of merchandise, and involves stocks of good, wares or merchandise (<i>i.e. Department stores, Markets, Retail or wholesale sales, etc.</i>)
Storage	<p>S-1: Storage uses that is not classified as a hazardous occupancy (<i>i.e. Baskets, Cardboard boxes, Furniture, Leather, etc.</i>)</p> <p>S-2: Storage of noncombustible materials such as products on wood pallets or in paper cartons (<i>i.e. Cement in bags, Glass, Metals</i>)</p>