



Office of Audits  
Office of Inspector General  
U.S. General Services Administration

# Alert Memorandum: Fire and Life Safety Hazards at the Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia

Memorandum Number A250047-2  
September 29, 2025



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TO: ROBERT L. MILLER  
ACTING REGIONAL COMMISSIONER  
PUBLIC BUILDINGS SERVICE (4P)

FROM: R. NICHOLAS GOCO  
ASSISTANT INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AUDITING (JA)

SUBJECT: Alert Memorandum: Fire and Life Safety Hazards at the Richard B. Russell  
Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia  
Memorandum Number A250047-2

The purpose of this memorandum is to notify you of fire and life safety hazards at the Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia (Russell Building) that warrant your immediate attention. During an ongoing audit, we learned that PBS is bypassing the building's fire alarm system and monitoring service. Additionally, PBS has not repaired a nonfunctioning gas leak detection sensor in the building's chiller room. Taken together, these deficiencies place building occupants and visitors at risk of fire hazards or toxic exposure.

**BACKGROUND**

The Russell Building is a 27-story, GSA-owned building in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. Constructed in 1979, the building holds 30 courtrooms and serves as the main federal court facility in the Atlanta area. Its primary occupants are the U.S. District Court, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services, and U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia. The building also houses the U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and U.S. General Services Administration.

In March 2025, our office began an *Audit of PBS's Facility Operations Management: Richard B. Russell Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia*. The focus of this ongoing audit is to: (1) assess the overall operations and property conditions at the Russell Building; and (2) determine whether PBS has complied with applicable laws, regulations, and PBS policies governing environmental safety, fire protection, and property conditions at the building. During multiple site visits to the Russell Building conducted between May and September 2025, we observed the concerns described on the following pages.

## RESULTS

Fire and life safety hazards exist at the Russell Building because PBS: (1) is bypassing the building's fire alarm system and monitoring service and (2) has not repaired a nonfunctioning gas leak detection sensor in the building's chiller room.

### PBS Is Bypassing the Building's Fire Alarm System and Monitoring Service

PBS has been bypassing the Russell Building's fire alarm system and monitoring service every business day. This practice violates PBS policy and National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) codes. It also creates significant fire and life safety risks by potentially delaying emergency response and occupant alerts in the event of a fire.

GSA Order PBS 5921.1, *PBS Fire Protection Program Policy*, states that PBS shall provide workplace environments that are safe from fire and similar risks for building occupants. The policy also requires that PBS comply with industry standards for fire protection.<sup>1</sup> These standards include:

- NFPA 72, *National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code*, which sets guidelines for fire alarm and emergency communication systems; and
- NFPA 101, *Life Safety Code*, which sets minimum fire safety requirements for the design, operation, and maintenance of buildings.

While conducting interviews during our audit survey work, we learned that the Russell Building's operations and maintenance contractor calls the off-site fire alarm monitoring company each business day to bypass monitoring. After doing so, the operations and maintenance contractor bypasses the fire alarm system, disabling both audible and visual notifications of the fire alarm system throughout the building, including the bells/horns, strobes, and fire alarm pull stations.<sup>2</sup> In short, no alarms will sound if there is a fire or if someone pulls the alarm without manual intervention from the control panel.

PBS on-site building management and the operations and maintenance contractor told us that this has been done at the request of Russell Building tenants, who have complained that fire alarm system deficiencies have triggered false alarms that disrupt court operations. They also told us that PBS has been bypassing the fire alarms and monitoring service in the Russell Building since at least 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> GSA Order PBS 5921.1, January 2, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> A fire alarm pull station is a manual device, usually found on walls in hallways or near exits, that activates the building alarm when its lever is pulled.

Continuous fire alarm monitoring ensures prompt notification when an alarm is triggered, allowing trained operators to quickly notify the fire department when smoke and heat are detected. According to NFPA 72, if the fire alarm system is out of service for more than 8 hours, the authority having jurisdiction—in this case, PBS’s fire protection engineer—must implement mitigating measures.<sup>3</sup> Such measures may range from a simple occupant notification to a full-time fire watch. NFPA 101 defines a fire watch as the assignment of a person or persons to watch over the building and alert the fire department and building occupants if there is an emergency. The *PBS Fire Protection Program Policy* requires that fire watch personnel must be qualified, dedicated solely to perform fire watch duties, and trained in portable fire extinguisher use. The policy also provides that fire watch personnel may not consist of GSA staff or personnel from the responding fire department.

We reviewed fire alarm monitoring service records from May 28 through August 18, 2025, and found that the Russell Building’s fire alarm monitoring service was bypassed every business day for a period of more than 12 hours—typically, from before 6:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. PBS on-site building management told us they did not inform the PBS fire protection engineer that the fire alarm monitoring service was bypassed, and we determined that no appropriate mitigating measures were put in place. Therefore, PBS is not complying with NFPA requirements and its own fire protection policy.

### **PBS Has Not Repaired a Nonfunctioning Gas Leak Detection Sensor in the Building’s Chiller Room**

During our audit interviews, we also learned that a gas leak detection sensor in the Russell Building’s chiller room has been nonfunctional since March 2025.<sup>4</sup> This sensor is critical for detecting refrigerant gas leaks, which, if left undetected, could result in toxic exposure or fire hazards. Operating without a functioning gas leak detection sensor violates the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) ventilation safety standard for refrigerant systems. The ASHRAE standard mandates a detector in the room that activates audible and visual alarms, as well as mechanical ventilation, in the event of a refrigerant leak.<sup>5</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

The current conditions at the Russell Building present serious and ongoing fire and life safety risks. Absent an active fire alarm system and monitoring service and functioning gas leak detection sensor, PBS cannot ensure prompt emergency response and timely building occupant notification in the event of a fire-related emergency or gas leak. Therefore, immediate

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<sup>3</sup> NFPA 72, Sections 10.21.4–6.

<sup>4</sup> While we were finalizing this alert memorandum, PBS asserted that the gas leak detection sensor was replaced on September 23, 2025. We have not independently verified PBS’s assertion.

<sup>5</sup> ASHRAE Standard 15–2022, *Safety Standard for Refrigeration Systems*.

corrective action is necessary to ensure occupant safety in the Russell Building and restore compliance with NFPA and ASHRAE standards and PBS policy.

### **Compliance Statement**

This alert memorandum complies with the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's Quality Standards for Federal Offices of Inspector General. The related ongoing audit, when completed, will comply with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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## ***Attachment – Memorandum Distribution***

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