



# NCEES

advancing licensure for  
engineers and surveyors

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## NEWS RELEASE

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## NTSB report on gas explosion emphasizes role of engineering licensure in public protection

The release of the National Transportation Safety Board's report, *Natural Gas Distribution System Project Development and Review*, highlights the important protections that licensed professional engineers (P.E.s) provide the U.S. public. In this report, NTSB issued several recommendations concerning professional engineering licensure requirements. With its focus on competency and ethics, licensure is an essential safeguard for the public, and the National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying (NCEES) supports the NTSB recommendations as necessary steps for public protection.

The safety recommendation report was issued on November 14, 2018, in response to a series of explosions and fires on September 13, 2018, in Merrimack Valley, Massachusetts. These explosions and fires followed the release of high-pressure natural gas into a low-pressure gas distribution system. They resulted in damage to 131 structures, including the destruction of at least five homes. One individual was killed, and at least 28 others were injured.

Among other findings, the NTSB report concludes that the gas company would probably have identified the omission of regulator-sensing lines—thereby preventing the error that led to this accident—if the company had performed a comprehensive constructability review that required all departments to review the project plans and had a P.E. approve, or seal, the plans. In sealing such plans, a professional engineer takes responsibility for their accuracy and completeness. The report notes that the company field engineer was not a licensed P.E. and that neither state law nor company policy required a licensed P.E. to develop or review engineering plans for public utilities.

In relation to professional engineering licensure, the NTSB report specifically recommends that Massachusetts eliminate the P.E. license exemption for public utility work and require a P.E. seal on engineering drawings for public utility projects. It further recommends that the gas company revise its engineering plan review process to ensure that a P.E. seals plans before work begins. The NTSB recommendations concerning P.E. licensure requirements are changes that would protect the public, and NCEES hopes that all the proper steps are taken to ensure that these recommendations are addressed.

Massachusetts is not alone in allowing license exemptions for certain groups of engineers. Each U.S. state and territory sets its own licensing laws, and the majority have some type of exemption, including those for engineers working in industrial, manufacturing, public utility, and transportation settings. Some federal agencies also have P.E. license exemptions for federal engineering projects. NCEES encourages other U.S. states, as well as federal agencies, to review this report and consider its recommendations for their own jurisdictions to avoid similar tragedies.

Professional licensing has one purpose: public protection. P.E.s must meet education and experience requirements and pass the required exams to establish that they can practice engineering without endangering the public. To maintain a license, a P.E. must adhere to a strict code of conduct, with the primary charge being to practice the

profession in a manner that protects the health, safety, and welfare of the public. A professional engineer who violates this obligation—either through incompetence or unethical actions—is subject to losing his or her license.

While we cannot go back and prevent what has already happened, we can work to ensure that proper steps are taken to prevent similar accidents. Public utilities is one of the many areas in which professional engineers can be called on to ensure that business activities adequately protect public welfare. As an organization committed to advancing licensure for engineers and surveyors, NCEES and its member licensing boards from all U.S. states and territories continue to focus on the fundamental goal of safeguarding the public. NCEES commends NTSB for taking this position to protect the U.S. public from incompetent or unethical practices.

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#### **ABOUT NCEES**

*The National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying is a nonprofit organization made up of engineering and surveying licensing boards from all U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Since its founding in 1920, NCEES has been committed to advancing licensure for engineers and surveyors in order to safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of the U.S. public.*

*NCEES helps its member licensing boards carry out their duties to regulate the professions of engineering and surveying. It develops best-practice models for state licensure laws and regulations and promotes uniformity among the states. It develops and administers the exams used for engineering and surveying licensure throughout the country. It also provides services to help licensed engineers and surveyors practice their professions in other U.S. states and territories. For more information, please visit [ncees.org](http://ncees.org).*