

Egress Windows Buyer's Guide



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When building or remodeling, there are lots of details that need to be taken care of and addressed. One of these details is very easy to overlook but is actually vital both for safety and code compliance: *the egress window*. In this guide, we'll be discussing the important things you need to know about egress windows including: *What Are Egress Windows; The Pros & Cons; The Various Types of Egress Windows On The Market To Choose From; How Much Should An Egress Window Cost?; and Choosing the Right Egress Window Installation Company.*

What Are Egress Windows?

It's helpful to start by going over the basics about these special windows. An egress window is a specific type of residential window designed for easy escape during an emergency. The word egress means to leave a place. Most of the time when egress windows are being discussed, it's specifically about basements. That's because these special windows are now mandatory for most basements that are either finished or could be finished to become living spaces. This mandate applies, whether the residence is a new construction or under remodeling. If you are finishing a basement, you will be required to have a legal egress.



An egress window must have adequately large dimensions as set out in your area's building codes. The requirements for egress windows in Michigan, for example, are fairly standard and are taken from the International Residential Code. These criteria state that an egress window:

- Must open to at least 24 inches in height
- Must open to at least 20 inches wide
- Must be no smaller than 5.7 square feet overall
- Must have a sill no higher than 44 inches off the ground

Additionally, egress windows have to provide an unobstructed, clear opening. This means in most cases there cannot be security grating or lock bars that could be considered obstacles to opening it from the inside.

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The window is only half the story, however. The other important component for a basement egress window is the well. This is an area outside the egress window that allows a person to ascend to ground level and complete their escape from the building during an emergency. There are also codes governing these wells. In Michigan, an egress window well:

- Must open up to at least 3 feet in width
- Must have at least 9 square feet of horizontal space
- Must allow the egress window to open completely



If the well is deeper than 44 inches, it must also be equipped with steps or an affixed ladder to the ground level that isn't obstructed by the fully-opened window. The ladder has to project at least 3 inches from the wall and be at least a foot wide with rungs no further than 18 inches apart.

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Pros and Cons of Egress Windows



If you're having a new home built and it has a basement, adding an egress window is an all-around good idea. It adds only a marginal additional cost, and even if you have no plans to make the basement a living space, it not only keeps the option available in the future but also adds resale value. It's also the easiest time to install an egress window.



However, there are also benefits to putting an egress window in an existing residence, besides complying with the law if you're finishing your basement. The number one benefit is the whole reason egress windows exist: **saving lives**. According to the National Fire Prevention Association, 7 people a day die in home fires in the United States.

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Another great pro, is that egress windows provide a typically dark and stuffy basement with both light and airflow. This not only creates a better atmosphere but translates into reduced energy costs.

The main con, which is the price and inconvenience of retrofitting a basement to have an egress window, ultimately becomes a benefit in the long run. While the upfront investment can reach a few thousand dollars--adding time and expense to **remodeling--ultimately having a finished basement can add 10 or even 20 times this installation cost to your home's resale value!**

Types of Egress Windows to Consider



In most ways, the types of windows you can use as basement egress windows are the same as any other type you might have installed elsewhere, but some are more useful in this role than others. Here are the main options available in the marketplace, with specific attention to how they might function as egress windows.

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Double Hung Windows

Double hung windows have two sashes arranged vertically in a frame, with one—or sometimes both—able to slide open. They are readily available, cost efficient, and offer a long service life. The downside to using them as egress windows is that they must be at least 48 inches tall to create an opening of 24 inches.

Sliding Windows

Sliding windows also have two pieces in the frame, with one or both being movable. The difference between them and double hung windows is that sliders open along the horizontal plane. Because of this, they run into the opposite problem of double hung windows when considering them for egress windows: they have to be twice as wide as the regulations dictate to make a suitable opening, in this case 20 inches, making the sliding egress window a minimum of 40 inches wide.



Awning Windows

Awning windows are a single panel hinged at the top of the frame and swing outward. While attractive and useful in many instances, awning windows are not good for egress purposes because their manner of opening causes the window itself to obstruct a person trying to get out of it.



Casement Windows

A casement window attaches to the frame with hinges, with the window being operable like a door. Because the entire window opens, a casement window doesn't need to be larger than the required dimensions of an egress window, making it ideal for such an application. Most casement windows also use a compression seal instead of weather stripping, making them excellent at keeping drafts and moisture out. This is an important advantage over double hung and sliding windows, especially worth considering when installing an egress window in Michigan.

There are some disadvantages, though. Casement windows typically cost at least 10% more than other

window styles, and you have to make sure that the window is able to open all the way into a basement egress window well without obstructing any ladder or steps up to the ground level. Overall, though, casement windows make superior egress windows.

Window Wells

You also have a number of choices when it comes to a basement egress window's outer well. As we discussed in the section about regulations, if the well is more than 44 inches deep you'll have to choose between a fixed ladder or steps. The least expensive option is a prefabricated unit of corrugated steel with a ladder, but you may elect to use other materials like wood or brick to make the well more attractive. These latter choices go well with a stairwell configuration leading from the egress window. Even if you go with a basic window well, you can buy a liner that will make it look like brick or stone, or printed with another type of natural scenery to enjoy. Many people also add a cover for their well, which protects against falls from the ground level and adds a bit more security but can be easily moved from inside to allow escape. A cover will at least partially block the sunlight, however.



How To Find The Right Egress Window Company



When looking at egress window companies, there's almost as much detail to consider as with the windows themselves. What most people do when in need of any kind of contractor is to ask for recommendations, and this is generally a pretty solid option. Companies know this and thrive on referrals and recommendations, so they'll do as good a job as they can for you in order for you to be impressed and hopefully recommend their business to someone else. Ask anyone you know what their experience was and what they liked and didn't like about working with the contractor they recommended to you.

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You can also look at ads. Construction companies frequently place ads in local newspapers, do direct mail flyers and even come door to door, spreading the word about the services they offer. Companies know that many customers find them via the Internet now, and particularly Google and Google Maps. Visit sites like Google, Yelp and Angie's List to put in what you're looking for and generate a list of local businesses that offer those services.



Online reviews have become a critical part of how to evaluate who you're going to do business with. The internet has helped hold contractors accountable and let the cream of the crop rise to the top. This has taken a lot of the guesswork out of figuring out who you can trust. As you compare reviews from trusted sites like Google and Facebook, make sure that you take into account the star rating, quantity of reviews and how recent they are.



Make a list of any companies you find that look promising. Now is the time to do some further research and see which of the companies on your list are worth reaching out and requesting a bid from. Any reputable contractor will be licensed, insured, bonded and lead safe certified. Check with any relevant trade organizations as well as the Better Business Bureau to see if there appear to have been significant problems in the past, and that they're properly registered and certified by all relevant authorities.



Once you've found a handful of companies you'd like to reach out to, start contacting and interviewing them one by one. Some things you will want to ask about include price, styles offered, more about their business, any applicable warranties, estimated time frame for completion, how permits will be handled and how they will coordinate with the utility companies to make sure lines are not cut.

Always, always make sure any contractor you do business with is fully insured with liability and worker's compensation. Ask for a certificate of insurance and keep it for your records, along with all other information about the project. Ask each company you're relatively serious about hiring to provide a bid. Don't just go with the lowest cost - go with your gut. Was the contractor personable, respectful and knowledgeable? Did they provide you information and bids on time? If they provided them late, that's a fairly good indicator of how they will work on your project as well. If you have not already done so, be sure to carefully vet each company that makes it into your final choices.



Price

Like any home job, the cost of professionally installing a basement egress window depends on the options you choose. For the most basic setup of a casement window with a professionally installed egress system, expect prices to start at around \$4000. The biggest cost multipliers will be additions to the well, window upgrades and type of labor package selected. Do-it-yourselfers may be tempted to save labor costs, but because installing a basement egress window involves stringent codes and cutting the foundation, most homeowners will be best served hiring a licensed and experienced window installation company for this job.



We hope this Buyer's Guide has been helpful in understanding egress windows and the different forms they can take. There are numerous options to weigh when considering putting in an egress window, especially a basement unit, but ultimately the most important thing is that it meets your local safety requirements. Hopefully, no one in your home will ever need to use an egress window for its designed purpose, but having it there just in case will give you and your family peace of mind.

If you'd like to know more about egress windows, contact us for a free consultation and estimate. Our Expert Home Improvement Consultant will measure and inspect the exact egress window project that you have in mind; help you select the right styles, colors and quality that suit your unique needs and tastes and finally leave a *"down to the penny"* price to make it easy for you to plan and budget.



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