

riskreporter

for senior living facilities

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION BY CHURCH MUTUAL INSURANCE

Prepare today to avoid headaches this winter

As the days grow shorter and temperatures start to drop, it's critical to finish up facility winterization tasks. Experts from the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) offer their "Top 10" checklist to ensure comfort and avoid problems this winter.

1. Develop an annual building maintenance plan

"Your plan should recognize both the norms and extremes, and everything you do to your facility should be part of a process," said Scott Hulick, program manager of the Facilities Management Program at George Mason University. "You have to be proactive and flexible—create an annual plan but also manage your facility by 'walking around.' Then you'll catch the small problems before they turn into something big."

Hulick, who has more than 30 years of experience in the industry, recommends monthly facility inspections carried out at different times of the day.

The changing of the seasons can provide the reminder for some key maintenance issues.

"As you shut down a system, that's really the time to inspect it and make repairs," said Ken Owens, director of corporate services for the Saskatchewan Research Council. "Check the air conditioning system in September or October and the heating system in April or May."

Ongoing maintenance plans also should incorporate capital improvement programs. Replacement is often the best solution for drafty windows and inefficient furnaces.

2. Lock in fuel oil contracts

Heating costs have risen dramatically the past few years. Prepaying or committing to a minimum purchase can cut costs for facilities that have a good idea of their heating needs.

"In general, it's better to underestimate your needs than overestimate," said Bill Hoffman Jr., director of real estate and facilities for CrownPointe Corporate Center in Allentown, Pa. "If you've committed to a minimum purchase and the winter is milder than expected, you can top off your tanks in the early spring."

3. Check your heating system and look for ways to cut costs

Good maintenance is a crucial factor in building safety, comfort and effective heating.

Heating and A/C systems should be inspected twice a year and filters changed and routine maintenance performed as per the manufacturer's recommendations. All facilities should have carbon monoxide detectors/ systems that are tested at least quarterly.

To keep costs down, consider installing automated controls that track changing conditions and adjust temperatures accordingly. Limit access to controls to prevent unauthorized or unnecessary adjustments. It also might be a good idea to research the installation of an energy-saving furnace.



Properly sealing windows will reduce drafts and help lower heating costs.

4. Prepare for snow removal

Decide if snow removal will be handled with facility staff or by an outside contractor.

If handling snow removal internally, perform routine maintenance on equipment (change oil in snowblowers, lubricate augers) and purchase any needed supplies (shovels, appropriate outdoor clothing, calcium chloride to melt snow on cement walks and rock salt for bituminous parking lots).

Bid requests to contractors should spell out minimum snowfall requirements, areas that the contractor will service (parking lots, sidewalks, service entrances) and fees if snow must be hauled away.

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Warding off flu and illness this winter

Last year's vaccine shortages and a less-than-optimal flu vaccine matchup led to what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) described as a "moderately severe" flu season.

This year could be another severe season as the supply of flu vaccine is in short supply.

A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that the numbers of both deaths and flu-related illnesses are much higher than previously thought. Death rates are now estimated at an average of 36,000 per year—instead of 20,000—and more than 200,000 people—rather than 114,000—are believed to be hospitalized each year as a result of the flu.

Of those hospitalized for flu complications, more than 40,000 were 85 years of age and older. Bacterial pneumonia and dehydration are two of the most common resultant health problems, and flu victims with chronic conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma and diabetes, might find their health problems worsened if they contract the flu. Diabetics are especially at risk. The CDC reports that during flu outbreaks, there is a 5 percent to 15 percent increase in death rates among people with diabetes, and they are six times more likely to be hospitalized with the flu.

Surprisingly low immunization rates among health care workers likely contribute to these flu statistics. Only 36 percent of this population is

immunized, despite CDC recommendations that all health care workers receive an annual vaccination. Remind your staff of the value of receiving a flu shot every year.

It will never be possible to entirely eliminate the flu, but with proper precautions, a facility can limit its impact and safeguard resident and employee health.

The flu vaccine is the most important weapon in the fight against the flu. The vaccine is typically available in October or November, and it's vital that all appropriate staff and residents receive it. When vaccines and predominant strains match, the CDC estimates a 70 percent to 90 percent effectiveness rate in preventing influenza for healthy people under 65 years of age and a 30 percent to 70 percent rate in preventing hospitalization for pneumonia and influenza among those elderly persons living outside chronic care facilities (such as nursing homes) and those with chronic medical conditions.

The vaccine is available as a shot or a nasal spray. The shot contains killed infectious viruses—the three believed to be predominant that year. The nasal spray is made with live, weakened flu viruses and is approved for healthy people between the ages of 5 and 49 who are not pregnant. With either type, it takes about two weeks for the vaccine to take effect.

Jay Robb, owner/administrator of The Heritage in Las Cruces, N.M., brings the vaccine right to his facility.

"Increase the compliance rate by making it as easy as possible for your residents and staff to get vaccinated," he said. Residents will typically need a signed consent form before the vaccination which might require the signature of another family member.

To provide additional safeguards, Heritage Health Care in Hutsonville, Ill., requires all staff and residents to have a hepatitis B shot and recommends that residents receive a pneumovac. This shot can help to protect residents from pneumococcal infection in the lungs,

blood stream and brain.

If the flu does hit, a facility must take every precaution to prevent it from spreading. Flu spreads through respiratory droplets that occur with coughing or sneezing. It usually travels from person to person, though it has been known to spread when a person touched something with a virus and then touched their mouth or nose.

Good personal hygiene, especially frequent, thorough hand washing, is essential. Avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth, and cover sneezes and coughs with a tissue or sleeve.

Thorough cleaning and frequent disinfecting also play a role.

At the Fay Wookey Memorial Assisted Living Center in Clark, S.D., a strict disinfection schedule is followed: tables after every meal; public bathrooms daily; and garbage cans weekly. All personal clothing is washed separately, and common linens are washed at a minimum temperature of 160 degrees.

A proper diet also helps strengthen the immune system. Owner/Administrator Gail Wookey encourages well-balanced diets and plenty of liquids. "Dehydration caused by one illness can lead to further complications."

Limiting exposure to the flu is crucial for your facility.

"When we know that flu has hit the larger community, we post signs asking visitors not to jeopardize the health of our residents," Wookey said. "We don't have school groups in, and we don't go on outings during flu season."

Robb relies on his staff to stay home when illness strikes.

"Everyone is worried about staffing levels which can make it tempting for people to come in to work even if they're sick," he said. "But it's much easier for me if an employee stays home sick and I have to cover one vacant spot, than if they come in and expose the entire facility."

If a resident becomes ill, full- or partial-quarantine procedures can help to contain the illness.

Flu symptoms

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Extreme tiredness
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches
- Gastrointestinal problems such as vomiting, nausea and diarrhea (these are more common in children)

Systems and Equipment Breakdown coverage—valuable protection

Systems and Equipment Breakdown coverage offers a seamless way to insure boilers, heating equipment and many other systems vital to your facility and operation. Items protected by this coverage include:

- Computers and data processing equipment
- Telephone, communication, security systems and audiovisual equipment
- Air conditioning motors, compressors, systems and piping
- Electrical cable, wiring, panel boards, switch gear and transformers
- Boilers and heating equipment
- Engines, motors, compressors, fans, blowers and generators

Today's senior living facilities are filled with electrical systems, and systems and equipment breakdown coverage is insurance for the hardware. The coverage pays for physical damage to

the equipment. It does not cover normal wear and tear nor does it cover damage to software programs from bugs or viruses.

Some examples of instances where coverage would apply:

- Electrical arcing causing damage to the motor of an air conditioning unit
- Electrical burnout to an electrical panel
- Damage to communication systems and office equipment caused by a power surge
- Damage to internal components of a personal computer used for office administration
- Boiler explosion, mechanical breakdown and damage to internal components of boilers and pressure vessels
- Loss of income caused by service interruption

In addition to the insurance, inspections and maintenance of the equipment should be performed regularly. Jurisdictional inspections of boilers and pressure vessels are required by many states and municipalities. Check with your local building and zoning office for more information. Also, by creating and following a strict maintenance program, many losses can be prevented or the damage reduced.

Some commercial property and business owners insurance policies include systems and equipment breakdown coverage. If your insurance policies do not include the coverage, talk to your agent about adding the coverage as an endorsement. Be sure to review your policy with your insurance representative to make sure that all of the equipment that your business relies on is covered.

Make safety a priority when decorating

Keep your holidays merry by following these decorating precautions.

Christmas trees

According to the National Safety Council, more than 400 fires involving Christmas trees—both real and artificial—occur each year and cause almost 40 deaths. There are many steps you can take to reduce the likelihood of a fire occurring at your facility.

When using a real tree, try to buy one that's been recently cut. Good things to look for include secure needles and those that bend instead of breaking. Not sure how long a tree's been standing in the lot? Make a fresh cut and keep the tree well watered. Fresh trees can soak up a large amount of water and should be checked twice daily. If the water level isn't going down, the tree is not absorbing water and will dry out more quickly.

When using an artificial tree, look for "Fire Resistant" on the label.

This doesn't mean that the tree won't catch fire but that it will resist burning. All trees should be placed in a sturdy tree stand, and it's a good idea to anchor larger trees to a wall. Keep trees far away from heat sources such as radiators and fireplaces, and make sure you have a fire extinguisher in the immediate area. Decorate with soft, nonbreakable items, and avoid using edible decorations that residents might confuse with food.

Lights

Look for the UL label on all lights, and always use the proper certified lights and cords. If decorating outdoors, only use lights designed for exterior use. Inspect cords and lights annually, and replace any lights with frayed cords or damaged sockets. Don't use more than three strings of lights per extension cord, and don't leave lights burning overnight.

Candles

Although candles might seem like the perfect choice to make a room festive and cozy during the holidays, you should avoid them. According to the U.S. Fire Administration, fires caused by candles were responsible for \$120.5 million in damages and 90 deaths in 2001.

Avoid heights and limit obstructions

For employee safety, try to limit the number of decorations that require them to use a ladder. Exterior lights can be used on bushes and low-lying trees, and ground-based figurines lend a festive air. Doors and tables are safe, convenient places to decorate.

Keep decorations out of high-traffic areas and exits, and use extension cords as little as possible. When decorating, check the locations of sprinkler heads or smoke detectors so you don't block them.

“Snow removal is crucial,” Hulick said. “You need to create a relationship with your contractor—you need to know you can rely on them at three in the morning.”

5. Check for air leaks

Air penetration is expensive, and windows and doors are the most common culprits. For leaking windows, caulk and weather-strip on the exterior, and consider using plastic coverings and heavy drapes on the interior. Do not leave window air conditioner units installed during the winter months.

Double doors can help to cut air loss in high traffic areas as can heavy plastic curtains near kitchens and supply receiving areas. Check to make sure that doors are closing properly.

If heating bills seem to be out of line, check with the BOMI (Building Owners and Managers Institute) for heating cost benchmarks in the area. Facilities with abnormally high heating bills might want to invest in infra-ray testing.

In addition to letting in cold air, openings also can let in unwanted pests.

“Use a mirror and a flashlight around the building perimeter to find voids between the foundation and the exterior finish,” said George Gogola, director of facilities and risk management for the College of American Pathologists. “Fill these in immediately with mortar, caulk or cement.”

6. Winterize your plumbing system

Frozen or burst pipes can be a winter nightmare. To avoid them, turn off, drain and cover all outside faucets. Don't forget to check your cooling system which can contain fluid in the coils.

On the inside, pipes located in unheated areas create the greatest potential for problems. To protect these, wrap them in insulation, and on especially cold days, plug in a heat trace (a wire embedded in plastic that maintains a low voltage level of heat) or leave water dripping.

“Make sure you know where all your shut-offs are,” said Ray DiVito, assistant general manager for Jones Lang LaSalle Real Estate and Investment Management Services. “And install water alarms for remote areas.”

Other plumbing tasks: test, clean and treat closed-loop hot water heating systems, clean and sanitize condensate drains and descale and test humidifiers.

Facilities in milder climates might continue to water throughout the winter months but should carefully time their watering sessions. Chilly early morning temperature can cause ice to form and create slipping hazards. Wait until the warmer midday for watering chores.

7. Take it to the top: inspect roofs, chimneys and gutters

Vents, chimneys and areas where the roof line joins a vertical wall are common places for leaks. It will be nearly impossible to find all of them, but an annual inspection will uncover obvious problems.

Some facilities have problems with ice dams. They occur when the snow melts on warmer sections of the roof but freezes in the unheated eaves.

“Electrical heating cables in the gutters and a foot or two into the eaves can often solve this problem,” Owens said.

Collapsed or dirty chimneys can cause fires or carbon monoxide buildup. Hire a chimney specialist to inspect them each year, and clean and repair

when necessary. Install a chimney screen over the top to prevent clogging or animal access.

Clean gutters twice a year, and make sure that downspouts take the water away from the building. Keep trees trimmed back from the roof.

8. Take a look outside

Uneven or cracked sidewalks or steps and loose handrails can spell trouble for residents, employees and visitors. Look for and correct problems that could cause a tumble.

Shorter daylight hours make it more important than ever that lights and timers work properly.

9. Prepare landscaping

Fall is an excellent time to prepare plants and lawns for spring. Apply fertilizer, feed tree roots and prune after the first frost. After the last watering, blow out sprinkler systems to prevent freezing.

Protect expensive plantings with burlap bags and apply gypsum at turf edges near roadways to protect the lawn from road salt damage.

10. Create a backup plan

Bad weather can cause power outages and limit a facility's ability to procure basic necessities—especially if it's in a rural or remote area.

Maintain at least a three-day supply of water and food and a week's supply of medicine. Have flashlights and batteries and at least one cell phone on site. It's also a good idea to have rapid access to a generator.

“Work closely with your fire and police departments and the power company,” Hulick said. “They can help you to set up a plan and will be better able to help you in the event of an emergency.”

Winterization resources:

IFMA
www.ifma.org
(713) 623-4362

BOMI
www.bomi-edu.org/
(800) 235-2664

Local technical colleges also can be an excellent resource for winterization and facility management information.

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