

Risk Reporter

Fall
2011

Vol. 10
issue 4

A quarterly publication by Church Mutual Insurance Company



Reaching out to the homeless community: how your ministry can help

Homelessness is a tricky statistic to measure. Sometimes it is temporary. At other times, there is no end in sight. The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) states that measuring the number of homeless people in the United States at any one time is impossible. However, more important than knowing how many people are affected is putting an end to the problem.

Houses of worship are no strangers to lending a helping hand in times of need. Some open their doors to serve meals to homeless people in their communities. Others offer shelter. Your ministry might offer volunteer opportunities to the homeless or, in some instances, employment. In any case, members of the congregation come together to better the lives of those less fortunate in the community.

But how can a congregation go about this in a way that is safe, effective and positive?

Churches United for the Homeless in Moorhead, Minn., was founded by a handful of community churches in the fall of 1987 and is now supported by more than 50 member churches. Executive Director Jane Alexander said the organization is one of the largest homeless shelters in the Midwest, offering a safe haven for single homeless men and women, as well as homeless one- and two-parent families.

"The facility provides community center hours during the day, three meals a day, a thrift store, a food pantry and emergency shelter," Alexander said. "We are able to house 65 men, women and children on any given night."

Churches United for the Homeless depends on volunteers and donations from its member churches to maintain its facility and services.

"As our organization has grown, we've become a much more sophisticated service provider," Alexander said. "Our members are very attuned to the issues within the homeless community. We also have case workers who come right to our site to help with our guests."

"There are some things a ministry can do for community members affected by homelessness that can be just as beneficial as providing shelter," said NCH Executive Director Neil Donovan.

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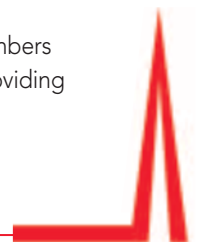
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(reaching out)

"One of the most important things you can do is to involve the homeless as equals and not simply people to be served," Donovan said.

This can be as simple as integrating homeless people into your congregation or allowing them to volunteer their time.

"One great idea we offer is organizing a homeless person's action group within the congregation that allows the homeless to give back to the organization," Donovan said. "It's a wonderfully empowering effort."

Another suggestion Donovan offers is asking homeless people to write articles for the congregation's website or newsletter about their experiences or select someone from the homeless community to act as chairperson on the worship center's board of directors.

"At NCH, we spend a lot of time convincing people not to treat the homeless as 'recipients' or clients but rather as equals," he said.

If you are interested in organizing a homeless shelter at your worship center, the NCH offers some helpful guidelines:

- Educate yourself on homelessness. The NCH website offers fact sheets and reports about homeless populations, mental illness, substance abuse and other issues important to the operation of a shelter.
- Form relationships with other organizations in the community that are active with the homeless community. Contact local food banks and soup kitchens or work with nonprofits that serve men, women, children, families, the mentally ill and substance abusers.
- Find out if any local businesses are willing to help. Ask area restaurants to donate food or retail outlets to give clothing. Find a health professional to help educate the homeless on diseases they should watch out for.
- Set rules and stand by them. A curfew can keep thieves from sneaking in and out at night when everyone is sleeping. Maintain a zero tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol. Separate single men and women and, to make them feel safer, place the women close to the person on watch.
- Select someone in the congregation to be in charge of volunteer coordination. Always have a backup to fill in on short notice for the night shift.
- Form a positive relationship with the local police department. Make sure they understand the rules you have set and how you are going to enforce them. Ask for their suggestions on making your shelter safe.

There also are steps to take to assure that operations run smoothly and ensure safety for both your congregation and its occupants:

- Clear out floor space for the shelter and remove any unnecessary furniture. Use folding chairs and tables, as they can be set up and then stored.
- If possible, offer beds, showers, laundry, kitchen facilities and a storage unit for belongings. A bed could consist of a mat on the floor with two blankets.
- Stock your shelter with necessary supplies, such as toilet paper, cleaning supplies, light snacks and coffee.

Mary Stafford serves as the director of Life in Jesus development for Brookfield Lutheran Church in Brookfield, Wis. Brookfield is a western suburb of Milwaukee with roughly 40,000 residents. Unlike its neighbor to the east, the community exists within a middle- to upper-class environment.

"Homelessness in our own community is not something we see often," Stafford said.

But that doesn't prevent the church from joining forces with agencies in Milwaukee that combat homelessness every day, which is a beneficial way for any ministry to remain involved.

"In my mind, our mission is more about connecting with agencies in our community and supporting communities that solely serve the homeless," Stafford said. "These agencies are already doing a great job. There's no need for us to reinvent the wheel. But they need help — fresh hands and fresh energy every day. That's where we come in."

One benefit of working directly with an agency already set up as a homeless shelter is that guidelines are already in place to help operations run smoothly, while limiting the pressures placed on the ministry. Members of the Brookfield Lutheran Church congregation volunteer their time with different agencies in Milwaukee and often hold food and funding drives to collect donations and items often needed by homeless shelters.

"We like to keep our congregation up to date on opportunities that arise in our area in case they'd like to volunteer their time or resources," Stafford said.

"We feel that the most important part of getting the congregation involved with the homeless community is the awareness it provides."

- **For more information**, visit the National Coalition for the Homeless website at www.nationalhomeless.org.



Managing Your Risks

Sprinkler systems require maintenance

Church Mutual's risk control representatives are often asked about suggested maintenance practices for sprinkler systems. We also get questions concerning the frequency of inspections for kitchen exhaust hoods that have fire suppression systems installed within them.

Keeping fire suppression systems in proper working order requires routine maintenance. The recommended work practices we suggest to our customers include the following:

Wet-pipe sprinkler systems — Have all automatic systems tested annually by qualified personnel. Keep records of the inspections and tag the system to show the most recent inspection date.

Also inspect all wet-pipe systems annually prior to the onset of freezing weather. These inspections should be done to verify that windows, skylights, doors, ventilators, other openings and closures, blind spaces, unused attics, stair towers, roof houses and low spaces under buildings do not expose water-filled sprinkler piping to freezing conditions. Also verify that adequate heat (minimum of 40 degrees Fahrenheit) is available.

Dry-pipe sprinkler systems — Have all automatic systems tested annually by qualified personnel. Keep records of inspections and tag the system to show the most recent inspection date.

Kitchen systems — Have the automatic fire extinguishing system that protects cooking equipment inspected and serviced semiannually by a properly trained and qualified vendor to ensure it is fully charged and in proper operation. Fusible links (including those on fire damper assemblies) should be replaced annually or more frequently if required by the manufacturer or local codes.

One last related point. Have your fire extinguishers serviced annually by a qualified vendor to ensure proper operation of all of them in the event of a fire emergency. Each fire extinguisher should have a tag or label securely attached that indicates the month and year the maintenance was performed and identifies the person who performed the service.

Edward A. Steele, CSP
Risk Control Manager



Seasonal Spotlight Fall

Sprinkler system type impacts maintenance and precautions

The promise of cooler temperatures serves as a good reminder to make sure the sprinkler system at your house of worship is properly maintained and ready for winter. However, before maintenance can begin, it is important to understand how the type of system can impact maintenance protocol and potential cold-weather issues.

"Different sprinkler systems are designed to handle different climates," said Matt Klaus, senior fire protection engineer at the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). "The type of system and potential climate in your location will impact the required maintenance and necessary cold-weather precautions you should take."

Dry-pipe system

In a dry-pipe system, the pipes are empty, and water sits behind a dry valve.

"Dry systems are effective for temperatures reaching -40 degrees Fahrenheit, making it a good option for cold-weather climates," Klaus said.

Water-based system

"Water-based sprinkler systems are susceptible to potential freeze issues when the temperature drops below 40 degrees Fahrenheit," Klaus said. "Standards set by NFPA require wet-pipe systems to be installed in environments with a minimum temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Where temperatures are anticipated below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, other design solutions including insulation and dry-pipe systems should be considered."

Conduct routine inspections to monitor room temperature and proper pipe insulation. Bulges in the insulation, shifted insulation or exposed pipes could indicate potential problems and should be addressed immediately.

Chemical-based system

Glycerin and propylene glycol are the only two approved antifreeze solutions allowed in chemical-based sprinkler systems. Ethylene glycol is banned.

"The concentration of a chemical-based system should be inspected annually, generally before the winter season, by a trained staff member, contractor or system engineer," Klaus said. "It is imperative that the solution does not have more than 48 percent glycerin to 52 percent water, or 38 percent propylene glycol to 62 percent water."

The main drawback of chemical systems is glycerin is only effective down to -19 degrees Fahrenheit, and propylene glycol is only effective to about -4 degrees Fahrenheit," Klaus said.

In very cold climates, buildings that contain chemical-based sprinkler systems should be kept at a temperature well above 32 degrees Fahrenheit.

- **For more information** and tips on winterizing sprinkler systems, visit www.churchmutual.com, click on "Safety Resources," select "Buildings and Grounds" and then "Plumbing."

Q | A

A Perspective

Chris Hamilton is a regional sales director for Shoes for Crews, a West Palm Beach, Fla.-based company that has specialized in footwear for workers since 1984. In a recent independent slip-resistance test study conducted by Precision Testing Laboratories, Shoes for Crews out-gripped the competition by more than 200 percent. Shoes for Crews are worn in more than 100,000 workplaces in the United States and throughout the world. Hamilton shares his insight on the importance of slip-resistant shoes at houses of worship.



Risk Reporter: Are all slip-resistant or safety shoes equally effective in preventing slips and falls?

Hamilton: No, different sole compounds and tread designs create different coefficients of friction. Therefore, some shoes grip the floor better than others. It is important to look for a shoe that is labeled as "slip-resistant." "Safety shoes" or "oil-resistant" shoes are designed differently and do not provide the same protection against slips and falls.

Shoes for Crews shoes are designed with a special rubber compound and unique tread design. The rubber compound grips the microscopic roughness of the floor surface while the grid pattern helps channel liquids out from under the sole of the shoe.

Risk Reporter: What areas of a worship center would you recommend slip-resistant shoes be worn in and why?

Hamilton: I would recommend slip-resistant shoes be worn in any area where there might be contaminants present, such as liquids, oils or grease, that could compromise the surface of the floor. This would include, but not be limited to, kitchens, bathrooms, hallways or ramps. Our footwear is designed to prevent slips and falls as a direct result from stepping on any of these alike contaminants, causing a "gripping" effect, regardless of how wet or slippery the surface.

Risk Reporter: How would you recommend employees use your shoes to get the most benefit and value out of them?

Hamilton: Since our outsole is what offers the unique protection against hazardous slips and falls, having that outsole last as long as possible will provide the most benefit out of our shoe. I would recommend only wearing your work shoes at work. The more you wear them, the more that grid pattern will wear down, causing the slip resistance to lose its effectiveness. Also keep the grid pattern clean of rocks and other foreign objects that might clog up the pattern itself, also reducing the effectiveness of the shoe.

Risk Reporter: How does the cost of slip-resistant shoes compare to ordinary tennis shoes?

Hamilton: The cost of Shoes for Crews footwear is generally comparable or even less than your average shoe. Our shoes are engineered the same as any other shoe you might purchase from a local store. We offer more than 85 different styles of footwear, ranging from athletic to casual and even dress.

Risk Reporter: Since Shoes for Crews are available worldwide, what major companies are you affiliated with?

Hamilton: We are currently working with thousands of vendors. Some of our larger customers include McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Yum Brands, Whole Foods Market, The Cheesecake Factory, Anheuser-Busch, InterContinental Hotels and many more.

■ For more information, visit www.shoesforcrews.com.