

# Risk Reporter

for Senior Living Communities

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## Reduce winter woes with fall fixes

Similar to death and taxes, winter is an inevitable part of life, but effective facility preparation now can help make the colder months as hassle-free as possible. Here are some steps that can make a difference whether “winter” means -20 degrees or 40+.

### Start with a walk around

Walk the property with your staff, point out areas that could be a concern this winter and discuss solutions.

“Look at your entrances, your sidewalks, your handrails,” said Dennis Engstrom, risk manager at Newbury Property Management in Des Moines, Iowa, which runs senior living facilities in the state. “Point out hazards and either repair them immediately or mark them in some way—for instance, spray paint a crack in the sidewalk with high-visibility paint. Anything that’s a problem when it’s sunny and dry will be even more of a problem when the weather is bad.”

Look for indications that facility areas are being used in ways you didn’t intend.

“We had a situation where people were routinely using a grassy hill instead of the sidewalk to get from the parking area to the facility,” Engstrom said. “We learned the hard way that this was a slipping hazard—especially when it was wet—and ended up adding another walkway with a railing.”

### Bring in a fresh eye

“After a while, you don’t even notice the problems because you’ve learned to step over that crack in your sidewalk or duck under a low-hanging branch,” Engstrom said.

But work-arounds can mean trouble. Bring in an outsider to take a critical look. If your company has multiple facilities, the manager of one could easily play this role for a sister organization. If you don’t, there are other options.

“You could have a ‘buddy’ facility that you trade inspections with,” Engstrom said.

### Take it from the top

Regular inspections, cleaning and repair of your roof, gutters, chimneys and vents will help you catch and take care of small problems before they turn into big ones. And conduct your inspections with an eye toward prevention. For instance, chimney caps can keep animals out of your building, and keeping trees trimmed back from your roof can prevent shingle damage.

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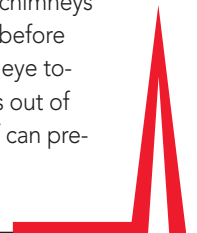
*Safety devices help eliminate needlesticks*

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*Risk Reporter talks with Mark Leita of the Scooter Store*



## ( winter risks )

### Seal your building

Gaps can run up your heating bill, expose your plumbing and give critters looking for a way out of the cold a way into your building. Good places to check for gaps include around windows, doors, pipes, vents and where the foundation meets the exterior finish.

Latex caulks are a good choice for gaps that are one-quarter inch or less—they can accommodate joint movement and are easier to clean up—while polyurethane foams are generally recommended for larger gaps.

Inside your facility, plastic window covers and drapes can cut down on drafts and chill in resident areas, and plastic curtains in your kitchen and receiving docks help to limit the amount of cold air that comes into areas where the door is opened frequently.

### Maintain your HVAC system

Boilers should be inspected at least annually—and most states (and insurers) require you to have this done by an outside resource.

“Our internal team has their HVAC certification updated each year,” Engstrom said. “This ensures they can handle routine maintenance yet have sufficient experience to understand when a problem requires an expert.”

Inspect your water heaters and drain your chillers to prevent freeze-up. And work with your HVAC equipment resource to determine when operating costs indicate that new equipment might be in order.

### Winter proof your plumbing

Avoid frozen pipes and, even worse, burst pipes.

Outside, drain and blow out your irrigation systems, disconnect all outside hoses and drain your hose bib and cover it. Drain your cooling system too.

Inside, be especially mindful of pipes on outside walls or in unheated areas. Depending on where they're located, you can protect vulnerable pipes by wrapping insulation around them, using a heat trace (a wire that's embedded in plastic and runs a constant, low-voltage level of heat); installing space heaters; or leaving water dripping. Know where your main shut-off valve is and exercise it regularly to make sure it works.

### Prepare for the worst

Winter storms can take down power lines and limit access to the outside world. Have an emergency plan in place that covers water, food, medications and heat.

“We have enough generator power and fuel to keep our facilities running for about a week,” Engstrom said.

Work with your emergency responders and the power company to come up with a plan for meeting resident needs in the case of an emergency.

## Smarter snow removal

How you manage the white stuff—and the ice and slush that follow—can have a huge impact on how smoothly your facility runs this winter.

### Set up your snow removal contract now

“Most contractors will set a limit on the number of facilities they can handle,” said Jim Meyers, president of Marquette Snow Removal in Marquette, Mich., a community that makes the “Snowiest U.S. Cities” list virtually every year. “If you wait too long, you may not get the contractor you want.”

### Map out your snow removal needs

“When we're estimating a contract, we map out the facility and walk through it with the client, specifying where we'll plow, salt and sand,” Meyers said. “A copy of this map goes into each truck so that every driver knows exactly what the facility requires.”

Your staff should mark any areas that could be damaged by the plows such as curbs and sewer caps. Meyers recommends using brightly colored stakes—lime green and red are favorites—that are at least 5 feet high.

### Ask for a contract that meets your needs

“People can make assumptions about what's included in a snow removal contract and then be surprised when things aren't handled in the way they expected,” Meyers said. “Read your contract very carefully—including the fine print.”

Things like sanding and shoveling aren't automatically part of a contract. Make sure your contract is very specific: for instance, you might want to spell out that if temperatures are above 30 degrees that you want the contractor to salt or sand.

### Make sure your contractor has liability insurance

“If the plow takes out a light pole, you want to know there's a check headed your way!” Meyers said.

### Require 24/7 availability

You should be able to reach someone at your snow removal company any time, day or night.

### Keep a snow log

“This is absolutely critical. You should keep a log, and your contractor should too,” Engstrom said. “It's an excellent management tool—people are more likely to do the job and do it well if they have to sign it—and the log provides valuable evidence that we're removing snow in a reasonable and prudent manner in the event of a slip-and-fall incident.”

### Bring effective snow management inside

Protecting your residents, staff and visitors from the dangers of snow is a challenge that doesn't end at your facility door. To prevent slips and falls inside from wet floors, keep absorbent runners at each door and mops at the ready. “If you have a receptionist near the door, make sure they're keeping an eye on the floors and sidewalk near the entrance,” Engstrom said.



## Managing Your Risks

### Battling the bed bug

Bed bugs have become a hot topic lately. Reported infestations in schools, luxury hotels, hospitals, cruise ships, dorm rooms and senior living communities have people on high alert and operators seeking answers.

Bed bugs are small, flat insects that are reddish-brown in color. They are wingless, range in size from 1 millimeter to 7 millimeters in length and feed on the blood of sleeping people and animals.

Infestations usually occur near the areas where people sleep. Coming out at night, bed bugs hide during the day in the seams of mattresses, box springs, bed frames, headboards, dressers and tables; in the cracks in a wall; and behind wallpaper.

Although not known to transmit disease, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention lists them as a pest of significant public health importance.

Preventing bed bugs is a difficult task. Bed bugs are brought into your facility, typically on boxes, folded clothing, bedding and furniture. One step to prevent bed bugs is to inspect items being brought into your facility for your residents, such as blankets, sweaters and chairs.

The easiest way to determine if you have a bed bug infestation is by bite marks on the face, neck, arms and hands of your residents. Keep in mind, sometimes it takes up to 14 days for the red marks—similar to a mosquito bite—to develop. If you see bites, you must search for other clues, including exoskeletons of bed bugs after molting, rusty-colored blood spots from their blood-filled fecal material that they excrete and, of course, the bugs themselves.

If an infested area is detected, call a pest control service and discuss the appropriate treatment. Typically, this will entail a variety of low-odor sprays, dusts and aerosol insecticides and then thoroughly scrubbing the immediate and surrounding areas. Because beds cannot be treated with insecticides, oftentimes disposal of the infected mattress is required.

Experts suspect the resurgence of bed bugs in recent years is due to increased resistance to pesticides.

Richard J. Schaber, CPCU, CRM  
Risk Control Manager



# Seasonal Spotlight Fall

### Safety devices help eliminate needlesticks

Your needlestick prevention checklist probably already includes puncture- and leak-proof sharps containers, employee and resident sharps training and proper use of personal protective equipment.

These are all critical “must haves,” but the reality is that they might not be enough to prevent needlesticks. What can help? Taking prevention one step further by choosing sharps that build safety into the product.

Passive safety devices are defined as products that don’t require the user to take any additional steps to activate the safety mechanism—it happens as part of the normal operation of the device.

“In the assisted living environment, most needlesticks are linked to diabetes care,” said Jeff Aubry, pharmacist in charge with Extended Living Pharmacy, a closed-door pharmacy or secondary wholesaler in Decatur, Ill., that works with senior living facilities. “Too often you’ll have a situation where the resident uses a sharps without supervision, doesn’t dispose of it properly and then someone ends up with a needlestick. Passive safety devices can help prevent that.”

If residents are ordering their own diabetes supplies, Aubry recommends you require they use passive safety devices—though he admits it may only be practical to do this with new admissions.

“Many people pick their blood glucose meter based on a TV ad. They buy the one that promises it’s the cheapest and just use whatever lancet comes with it—which is not likely to be the safest one,” Aubry said. “Price is a big concern for most residents, and you’ll have to convince them of the dangers caused by exposed sharps if you want them to appreciate the value of a more expensive device.”

If your facility orders supplies for the residents, safe sharps will be more expensive in the short term—“The cost is roughly double,” Aubry said—but could save you much more over time. Consider that even one needlestick could run to thousands of dollars in testing fees, lost days, disability expenses and, potentially, OSHA fines and citations, not to mention damaged staff and resident morale, and the per-unit cost becomes a lot more palatable.

BMA Management, an Illinois-based company that manages 34 senior living facilities, recently switched all of its diabetes sharps to safety versions.

“Our residents self-administer, with the help of a CNA, so we considered visual acuity, manual dexterity and cognitive function when we made our selections,” said Steve Kurtz, RN, interim administrator nurse at BMA. “We recognized that change can be hard for this population, but the products we selected have fewer steps than the devices they were previously using, and most residents have easily made the switch.”

- **To learn more about safe sharps use**, visit the American Nurses Association website at <http://www.nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/OccupationalandEnvironmental/occupationalhealth/SafeNeedles.aspx>.

# Q | A

## A Perspective

*Mobility means independence. And in recent years, a growing number of assisted living residents have discovered that scooters can be a valuable way to help them retain a level of mobility as they age. Scooters can help to ensure that a resident is able to move freely throughout a facility and join in activities off-site. And a study by RRC Inc., an economics consulting firm in Bryan, Texas, showed that power mobility devices (PMDs) can drive Medicare savings, as they can help to reduce the incidence of serious falls and sometimes delay a move to a higher level of care. But when not used properly, scooter use can lead to injury and even death. To learn more about scooters, Risk Reporter spoke to Mark B. Leita, senior director, government relations for the Scooter Store, in New Braunfels, Texas, one of the country's largest PMD distributors.*



### **Risk Reporter: What are some signs that might indicate a resident could benefit from the use of a scooter?**

**Mark Leita:** Not being able to safely ambulate from Point A to Point B—or not being able to do it in a timely manner. We sometimes find that people struggle with incontinence issues simply because they aren't able to get to the bathroom quickly enough.

### **Risk Reporter: When is it too soon for a scooter?**

**Mark Leita:** It's a fine line. We recommend that rather than putting a resident into a scooter when they start to have mobility issues that you talk to their physician, their physical therapist or their occupational therapist. It might be a situation where an exercise program can make a difference. But we did an internal survey to determine why people were contacting us about scooters, and more than 50 percent of them had had at least one fall.

### **Risk Reporter: If a resident wants to have a scooter, what abilities should the facility require of them?**

**Mark Leita:** Consider their cognitive functioning, vision and hearing and whether they have the physical ability to safely operate the scooter. Some facilities do a "driving test" that might include a demonstration of how to use the controls. It's a good idea to do this test when the resident first gets their scooter or moves into the facility and to have regular updates. Physicians are typically involved in the process so that helps ensure the scooter is a good choice.

### **Risk Reporter: What are some things that facilities can do to make it easier and safer to have scooters on the premises?**

**Mark Leita:** Arrange your furniture with scooter access in mind. Keep your sidewalks clear—don't have things like potted plants that are hard to see and easy to run into. Make sure you have ADA-approved ramps. Have plug-ins near tables in the dining room, so residents can recharge their batteries while they're eating.

### **Risk Reporter: What are some tips for outdoor scooter use?**

**Mark Leita:** This is a challenging issue. If your facility is near shops, restaurants or doctors offices, residents are going to want to use their scooter to get there. Look at the sidewalks near your facility. Do they have curb cutouts? Are there hills nearby? Talk to your residents and learn more about where they'd like to go in their scooter and discuss smart ways to get there. Putting a flag on a scooter can help increase visibility.

### **Risk Reporter: How do you know when it's time to have the resident retire the scooter?**

**Mark Leita:** The biggest indicator is a change in their medical condition. Considering that the average user of a PMD is 71 and has three chronic ailments, those changes can happen pretty much any time. As we age, we lose upper body strength, trunk stability and balance. Many scooter users can make the switch to a power wheelchair and still retain much of the mobility.

- **For additional information** about PMDs, go to [www.supportmobilitynow.com](http://www.supportmobilitynow.com) (a website that's sponsored by The Scooter Store).