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Preventing Slips and Falls at Condominium Developments, Apartment Complex and Homeowners Associations

Introduction

Slip, trip and fall accidents are a leading cause of injuries, resulting in substantial liability insurance losses each year. The National Safety Council estimates that more than 16,000 people die each year because of slips, trips, and falls. Many more suffer injuries, ranging from simple cuts and bruises to permanent disability. The sad fact is many slip and fall accidents are preventable. A comprehensive slip and fall prevention program begins with effective building design, and includes proper choice of flooring materials, floor cleaning and maintenance, facility inspections, employee training, technology, accident response, and documentation.

Building materials

Flooring should be chosen based on functionality and safety, as well as aesthetics. For instance, patterned marble flooring may look great in the entranceway, but it might get very slippery when wet. It's best to know these facts before selecting floor coverings. All flooring has a slip-resistant rating factor designated by the

manufacturer. A rating of greater than a 0.5 coefficient of friction is considered slip-resistant by the American Society for Testing of Materials (ASTM). However, since these standards are based on dry tests, floor material selection should be made with actual usage in mind.

Floor cleaning/coatings

One of the most misunderstood elements of a slip prevention program is floor coating. All coatings, when properly applied, should provide a friction coefficient of 0.5 or greater. Therefore, it is essential that employees responsible for cleaning floors be trained in the proper application of cleaning agents and protective coatings. Most floor coating suppliers recommend scrubbing and squeegeeing floors rather than mopping during regular cleaning. Additionally, many products on the market are designed to increase the friction coefficient of various flooring materials. Many companies also provide cleaning and product application technical support with the products they sell. Following the manufacturer's application recommendations is critical to achieving optimum results.

High hazard floor protection

Many slips and falls occur at entrances, particularly during wet weather. Accidents may be avoided if the staff is instructed to place carpet runners on the floor to absorb excess water, employ caution signs to warn patrons of a potential hazard, and periodically inspect and mop the area. Placing cleaning equipment in easy-to-reach areas can help reduce the response time.

Rainy or snowy conditions can create hazardous conditions for condominium and resort guests, particularly if they have never experienced snow before. Icy walkways and surfaces become slick and are a common cause of slips and falls. Accidents can be avoided through regular inspections, salting and sanding of ice and snow shoveling. Facilities should document snow removal in a similar manner noted in the next section.

Facility inspection

In civil court, companies that provide documented evidence of maintaining an effective slip and fall prevention program may stand a better chance of receiving favorable court rulings or jury decisions. Many companies use a "sweeps" program, inspecting their property on a regular basis and documenting the results in a "sweeps log." Although this program can be an effective preventative technique, one potential deficiency is in the failure of management to properly supervise inspections and insist on regular documentation. Management involvement and strong leadership is critical for the success of your program. Another strategy is to establish a formal policy that mandates all employees to identify and address any slip and fall hazard they encounter during their workday. To assure success, the policy should be reinforced with a formal training program, coupled with aggressive management engagement. Some hazardous situations call for greater attention, such as safeguarding entrances during a rainstorm or outdoor walkway during icy conditions. The frequency of inspections should be based on the hazard and as conditions warrant. A notation in a "storm log" or "manager's log" can provide a good defense in cases of slip and fall incidents.

Employee training

Employee training is at the heart of any slip prevention program. One major property management firm has set strict guidelines for its staff. Whenever employees find a slip hazard, they cannot leave the immediate area until they get the attention of another associate to either protect the public from the spill or retrieve a "spill response kit" to clean up the mess. Failure to comply with this rule can result in immediate termination. A regular training program leads to a heightened sense of awareness of the hazards, and increases the attention devoted to the protection of your patrons.

Slip, trip and fall incident management

How an employee reacts when a customer falls can have a dramatic impact on the outcome of litigation. Such comments as, "I'm so sorry, we've had a few customers slip in this same spot ..." or "This was our fault, I asked an employee to clean up this spill a while ago ..." does nothing to engender genuine customer relations or stave off future lawsuits. Employees should be trained on how to respond when a customer falls or is injured. Many companies engage in role-playing sessions as a training device. This allows employees to practice reacting to likely situations and responding to an upset or irate customer. Fact-gathering and incident reports are critical and should be completed immediately after an accident occurs. Professional investigators attest that stories can change over time.

Safety meetings

The purpose of having safety meetings is to improve the work system. The idea is to eliminate unsafe system "traps" that lead to accidents. Let employees know that their input is the driving force in eliminating unsafe system "traps". Evaluate ideas brought about in the safety meeting, act on them, and review follow-up with all. Here are some additional tips that can make your meetings effective:

- Keep the meetings short. About 5-10 minutes should do.
- Cover only ONE subject.
- Outline your subject prior to the meeting (what safety points do you want to make?). Know what you want to talk about.
- Relax. If you're relaxed while presenting the subject, your audience will relax also.
- Show real interest in your subject.
- Plan audience participation points into your meeting. Ask questions, plan a demonstration, and reward participation with positive feedback.
- Vary your presentation methods. Use photos, slides, videos, and objects, or go to a location to make your point.
- Use relevant examples.
- Don't talk down to your audience or criticize individuals in front of others.
- Have a translator available for non-English speaking employees.
- Document the meeting. Documentation lets you know which employees were absent and need to be updated, what issues need to be addressed and require follow up and provides a record for compliance.
- Stick to your schedule of meetings, otherwise they are likely to be postponed or forgotten. Plan more frequent meetings during busy times to remind employees the importance of taking safety precautions.

Stairways require special attention

A combination of deficiencies in design, lighting, maintenance and others are usually the culprits in stairway slips, trips and falls.

- Ideally, all tread and riser dimensions should be uniform throughout the entire stairway. When we use stairs, we tend to follow the same steps again and again until we reach on a plain surface. So, make sure that there are no uneven steps in your staircase and all steps are of the same size.
- Stair rails protect pedestrians from falling off the edge of the stairs or landings while handrails help pedestrians keep their balance and provide leverage when ascending or descending stairs. They greatly reduce the chance of a fall, they are strongly recommended, regardless of the number of steps.
- Furniture near or on the landings should be rearranged to keep pathways free.
- Do not store anything on the stairs, even temporarily.
- The staircase should be made with slip-resistant materials, otherwise, can be dangerous. You can reduce the risk of the slip by using anti-slip materials in the stair treads and landing surfaces.
- Staircase should be illuminated by enough lighting so that users can watch each and every step precisely.
- Many stairway accidents occur due to poor maintenance, non-attention and use. Keep stair treads clean and in good condition. There can be loose handrails or stair treads that left unattended can lead to accidents or injuries.

Install a camera system

Make sure nothing unexpected occurred during any time you've been away. Most digital video recorders use motion sensors for recording. This is the preferred method and makes camera reviews fast and easy for managers.

Has a tenant claimed they slipped at your facility and there are no witnesses? **Check the tape.**

Want to know who backed into the building causing thousands of dollars in damage? **Check the tape.**

Your insurance carrier will use the video footage in your defense.

Don't forget lighting

There's nothing more important to safety and customer satisfaction than great lighting throughout the site. Inspect your facilities night-time lighting at least monthly. Include the hallways, driveways, signage and other common areas in the inspection process.

Conclusion

Although courts have ruled for plaintiffs in many slip, trip and fall cases, a documented slip, trip and fall prevention program can go a long way to help keep customers from being injured and provide your company with a basis for defense should a claim arise. Additionally, employee slip and fall prevention is critical to your Workers' Compensation cost-containment efforts. Your insurance agent can assist you in establishing a slip, trip and fall accident prevention and claims management program, and can provide you with sample inspection checklists and incident investigation forms.



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