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EDITORIAL

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by Chris Tricozzi Added February 11, 2009

Although rarely discussed, janitorial closets can have an impact on the overall cleaning and maintenance, worker productivity, and health of a facility, including worship facilities. In fact, a facility seeking LEED-EB (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Existing Buildings) certification can earn at least one point just by having a Green—and clean—janitorial closet.

In order to meet LEED-EB criteria, the closet must:

- Be structurally sealed
- Include an independent ventilation system, separate from the ventilation system used in the facility
- Be equipped with hot and cold water and plumbed with drains for appropriate disposal of liquid wastes where chemicals are stored
 - Be set up in a way that minimizes the cleaning staff's exposure to cleaning chemicals

- Provide adequate lighting and storage
- Have readily accessible MSDS* information
- Be properly maintained and organized

However, adhering to this criteria is important even for worship facilities not seeking LEED certification. And the reason is quite simple: the janitorial closet is the "office" of the custodial department. Just as a cluttered desk may reflect a disorganized office worker, a disheveled janitorial closet says about the same thing of the custodial crew.

According to John Walker of ManageMen, a professional cleaning industry educational firm based in Salt Lake City, UT, "A disorganized janitorial closet looks unprofessional and often tells building occupants and managers, 'We [the cleaning crew] don't really know what we are doing.'"

Adds Walker, disarray in the janitorial closet can lead to worker anxiety and stress and affect cleaning workers' productivity as well as their overall cleaning effectiveness. And he indicates that once a closet is cleaned up, "we often see a real improvement in the custodial workers' attitude and professionalism."

However, there is an even more serious ramification of having a disorderly janitorial closet: accidents. Because so many of the conventional cleaning chemicals used for building maintenance can be hazardous to human health, ensuring that they are stored and organized properly is all the more important. Even environmentally preferable cleaning chemicals can be dangerous and health threatening if used or stored improperly. Below are some of the key steps to help ensure proper janitorial closet maintenance and safety.

Step 1: Have a Meeting with Your Janitorial Closets

When was the last time you looked inside your janitorial closets? For some worship facility managers, it may have been quite awhile since they've peered inside. That's why the first step in organizing your janitorial closets and starting a janitorial closet maintenance program is meeting with your janitorial crew and examining each of the closets. If the building's janitorial closets are disorganized and unkempt, have mops stored in soiled water, and emit offensive odors, it's time to start turning things around.

Usually the first step entails emptying everything out of the closets. Just as with a home closet, it is quite likely that items will be found that are no longer used or have not been used for several months if not longer. A good rule of thumb for tools and equipment: if it has not been used in a year, get rid of it.

However, when it comes to cleaning chemicals, a different set of rules applies. First, if the cleaning chemical is no longer used, properly dispose of it—the fewer chemicals stored in the closet, the better. Additionally, storing multiple sprayers of one type of chemical is unnecessary. Only as many as are needed for all cleaning workers who simultaneously use it should be available in the closet.

Many cleaning chemicals, especially Green cleaning chemicals, are highly concentrated and sold in multi-gallon containers. Depending on use, they may last several months or longer. In this case, only enough chemical to last approximately one week should be stored in the closet. Larger quantities of chemicals should be stored separately in their own isolated and properly sealed closets. Typically, when an auto-dispensing system is installed, which

automatically mixes chemicals with water, it will need to be refilled on a weekly basis as well.

Step 2: Give Your Closets a Makeover

With all materials removed from the closets, they should be cleaned from top to bottom. The cleaning standards that apply to other areas of the worship facility must be applied to the janitorial closets, and they should be checked and cleaned on a regular basis.

As part of the cleaning process, ensure that all vents are clean and operating correctly. Many times, dust has built up over the years to the point that the ventilation system is no longer performing correctly. Remove the cover and vacuum/clean inside the vent as much as possible. If it is completely clogged, there are service companies available that will unplug the clog and completely clear the ventilation system.

Now look at the walls. When was the last time your janitorial closet was painted? It is quite common for the janitorial closet to have not been painted since the worship facility was first constructed. Give the janitorial closet a fresh coat of light-colored paint so that tools and supplies are more visible and easier to locate.

Additionally, the shelving should be inspected. An efficient shelving system should be affixed to the wall. Many facilities are installing sturdy, grill/rack-type shelving instead of wood shelving. The rack shelving helps improve air circulation and ventilation and also allows spills to fall to the floor, where they can be cleaned up more easily and faster.

A final item to check is the lighting. The janitorial closet should have proper lighting that is operated by a wall switch or that comes on when the door is opened. Additionally, a naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling is dangerous and is more easily broken. An industrial-type lighting fixture should be installed.

Step 3: Organize and Prioritize

To restock the closets, select only the chemicals, tools, and equipment needed on a daily basis and, as referenced earlier, limit your selections to approximately one week's worth of products. Items should be organized based on how they are used, and the shelves should be labeled so that it is clear which products belong on each shelf. For instance, chemicals used for cleaning windows and mirrors should be placed in the same area.

Equipment supplies such as vacuum cleaner belts and filter bags should have their own space as well. Whenever possible, store janitorial tools and equipment so that they can hang from the wall. One goal of an efficient janitorial closet maintenance system is to keep as many items off the floor as possible.

For a variety of reasons, including the fact that English is a second language for many cleaning workers, some facility managers now color-code their cleaning chemicals. This practice is very common in medical facilities, mainly for safety reasons and to help ensure that the right chemical is selected for each cleaning task. For instance, some facilities will place a red-colored label on a shelf to designate where disinfectants are stored. The sprayers and containers filled with disinfectant will also have a red label affixed to their containers.

Step 4: Don't Forget the Floor

Like other areas of the janitorial closet, the proper maintenance of the floor is often overlooked, and this can become a potential safety issue that must be addressed. For instance:

- One of the problems with professional cleaning chemicals is that, should they spill, they can make floors very slippery. This is especially true of floor care chemicals such as strippers, finishes, and glosses.
- Depending on the effectiveness of the ventilation system, janitorial closets can become humid, resulting in moisture buildup on the floor, which can also cause the floor to become slippery.
- Because mops, buckets, and other items are filled and emptied in the closet, it is not uncommon for water as well as soiled cleaning solution to spill on the floor. This too can be dangerous.

To prevent these situations and promote safety, many facility managers place a rubber, modular drainage matting system on the floor of the closet. With this type of matting system, spills, chemicals, and debris fall below the standing surface, helping to prevent slips. Some more advanced systems can be cut to size as needed and, because they are modular, connect together to form an even, safe surface covering the floor.

Many facilities also select mats that have anti-fatigue properties. Most cleaning workers are on their feet throughout their work shift. Anti-fatigue mats provide a resilient cushion that experts say helps “massage” the feet and legs, reducing fatigue and other physical ailments and improving worker productivity.

Additionally, it is often a good housekeeping idea to place “wiper/scraper” matting systems directly outside the janitorial closet. Although they look similar to other mats, these mats wipe and scrape moisture, soil, and contaminants off shoe bottoms so that none are brought into or out of the janitorial closet. These mats come in different colors and can also be cut to size.

Earlier we said a cluttered desk is often considered a reflection of a cluttered mind. While this may or may not be true, the bottom line in the case of cleaning workers is what makes their work safer and most effective. Invariably, the better organized the janitorial closet, the better organized and efficient the cleaning worker.

And there is another less tangible but powerful benefit as well. Because the janitorial closet acts as the cleaning workers' office, a neat, clean, well-maintained closet gives them something to be proud of. It says a lot about them and the work they do—and your worship facility.

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