

An ounce of prevention – managing facility risks at your YMCA

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The YMCA was not yet founded when Ben Franklin first published his famous quote: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. But in my experience there are few words of wisdom that are more reflective of facility maintenance issues at YMCAs. Little things do mean a lot and keeping issues from getting out of hand is sound risk management.

I regularly see the dreaded “deferred maintenance” items in my work with YMCAs. These are things that perhaps are a bit overdue for attention and will continue to cause problems; often costing the Y financially and functionally. And it is this financial impact that is often cited as a reason for not repairing or maintaining some items properly. However, while not fixing something because of budget considerations may work in the short term, it will not in the end. The ounce you are saving now is going to cost a pound later in most cases.

Having been a CEO at a small YMCA I also understand the reality of budgets. So with that in mind I share a few low-cost methods of managing facility risks at your YMCA.

What do we have here?

One of the most effective ways to manage facility risks is by conducting regular and documented inspections of facilities. There is no way to effectively budget for maintenance issues without first knowing what the issues are and could be. Insurance companies and agents are a good resource for helping with another set of eyes for these inspections, but so are your staff and facility committee members.

I smell smoke!

Many Ys have small kitchens that are used for a variety of programs and staff functions. While it is important to have proper fire detection and suppression systems in your facility, it is not so much fun to set them off when someone forgets the popcorn in the microwave or burns the toast in the toaster. A simple stand-alone smoke detector in your kitchen can help prevent suppression system activation, building evacuation and possible water damage by sounding an early alarm before a fire starts.

Why's it raining in my Gym?

Water and hardwood gym floors are generally not compatible. Taking sometime to inspect air-handling and other roof penetrations for needed caulking or repair can help prevent water damage and slips/falls in your gym. The installation of protective cages

over sprinkler heads can prevent an errant ball from setting off a flood of damaging water.

Hey, can we swim on the roof?

Taking time to regular clear roof drains and gutter systems can prevent a whole host of issues associated with water infiltration and ice build-up. While you're up there check out adjacent trees for trimming needs and inspect flashing around any roof penetrations.

A sauna that is hotter than it should be

Saunas are a common cause of facility fires in YMCAs. Older models may not be sprinkled and can be a dried-out tinder box looking for a light. Saunas should be well insulated and their boards should be inspected for dryness. Try spraying the interior down with water once a month (check with the manufacturer if you can) after shutting the system down. Installing floor-to-ceiling barriers around heating units can help prevent patrons from placing papers, clothing and towels too close to the heating elements.

Okay there are a few; I have more, feel free to ask. And here is one that may not be cheap now, but will only get more expensive as time goes on and could really lead to a catastrophic loss.

Is that a sauna or a natatorium?

The air-handling and quality around indoor pools can be a real challenge. Cutting costs by turning off systems or allowing systems to work improperly can only lead to a variety of problems such a structural failure, health problems and moisture damage from condensation. Poor indoor pool air-quality can also adversely affect Lifeguard performance and vigilance. Proper air-handling in these environments is essential for managing facility risks and aquatic safety.

Mike Gurtler is a former 25-year YMCA professional that now is the managing partner and a senior consultant with [Safe-Wise Consulting](#). Safe-Wise works with hundreds of YMCAs and other groups across the US to creatively and responsibly manage the risks associated with providing their missions. Mike may be contacted for additional information by email at mgurtler@safe-wise.com