

Acting as a Warming Shelter this Winter?

As winter weather sets in, and there are prolonged periods of extreme cold, some churches may choose to act as warming shelters for those impacted by power outages or for those who do not utilize homeless shelters. A warming center is a short-term emergency shelter that operates when temperatures or a combination of precipitation, wind chill, wind and temperature threaten to cause cold related harm, such as frostbite or hypothermia. Their purpose is the prevention of injury from exposure to the elements.

Before opening your doors to help those in the community, please make sure you take the following steps to protect your church and the individuals it helps.

- Take the time to develop a written policy documenting standards by which the person(s) in the warming

center should abide. These should be similar to the conduct policy(s) you currently have for community events. It is best to consider prohibiting smoking and the consumption of alcohol. Once your policy is completed, be sure to post rules conspicuously for everyone.

- Make arrangements with law enforcement for periodic visits to the shelter while in operation. They will help ensure a safe environment and can help facilitate immediate medical attention if needed.
- Require volunteers & supervisors to be subject to application and background checks. Volunteers and staff should not be left alone with guests. This protects the volunteer (s), guests and staff from unfounded allegations. Secure from access those areas where a predator and victim might be concealed.

- Make sure the area where the individuals will be sheltered is in good repair and clean. The church will need to provide access to certain amenities that will help the displaced persons.
- Make sure Fire Exits are well marked and free of obstruction. In order to ensure safety in the event of an emergency, also be sure to post evacuation routes so they are easily identifiable.
- Make sure there is a well-stocked first aid kit. Staff and volunteers should have first aid training on treating common ailments and should know the signs of, and treatments for, frostbite and hypothermia.
- Make sure there are emergency supplies on site in case the individuals/volunteers are trapped in the church due to weather.

Equipment rooms - electric closets, utility rooms, boiler rooms, data closets, and phone rooms —hold the critical utilities that keep a building powered and connected. To eliminate fire hazards and allow safe access to workers, these rooms need to be kept clean and clear of clutter. The National Fire Prevention Association's (NFPA) fire code stresses that equipment rooms should be free of combustible materials and storage should be limited to only materials and supplies related to the operation and maintenance of the equipment in the room. While many of us view these areas as a great place to store old furniture, boxes and other items, it is best that these items be stored elsewhere. Some basic housekeeping practices to prevent fire hazards and ensure accessibility in equipment rooms are:

- Keeping flammable or combustible materials out of electrical closets.
- Maintain at least 36 inches of clearance from the equipment.
- Install equipment securely in racks or cabinets so that it is off the floor, if applicable.
- Cover all openings to the electrical equipment to prevent accidental contact.
- Periodically sweep and clean floor surfaces of dirt and debris.
- Ensure that there are fire-rated walls (or partitions) installed, depending on the equipment type and rating in the room.
- Install fire stops (such as fire caulk) in any wall penetrations or openings in the rooms.
- Installing a fire suppression system or keeping a fire extinguisher in the work area, depending on the equipment and room rating requirements.

Often, storage is at a premium, but the electrical and utility closets and rooms are NOT the places to store items. Keeping these rooms neat, orderly, and free of clutter and combustibles helps prevent catastrophic fire and protects employees and volunteers that access these areas.