

## Avoiding Slip, Trip and Fall Liabilities in Religious Organizations

Slips, trips and falls are some of the most common injuries across industry lines, with religious organizations being no exception. In fact, the nature of these organizations' operations—namely, experiencing frequent foot traffic on-site from community members and employees of varying ages—may contribute to an increased risk of such injuries. According to the latest industry research, more than 50% of injuries that occur in churches stem from slip, trip and fall incidents.

These incidents can result in numerous consequences for religious organizations, including injured employees or community members, potential liability concerns and reputational damages. As such, it's essential to take steps to prevent slip, trip and fall risk on-site. This article outlines ways for religious organizations to avoid such injuries and minimize associated liability issues.

### Conducting Risk Assessments

The first step in preventing slips, trips and falls on-site is identifying hazards that could contribute to these injuries. With this in mind, it's crucial for religious organizations to conduct periodic risk assessments to determine their properties' specific slip, trip and fall exposures.

When performing these assessments, religious organizations should review various property elements to ensure everything is in good condition and isn't creating potential hazards. For example, issues such as loose floor tiles or worn carpeting could result in slip, trip and fall concerns. If risk assessments identify any hazards, they should be addressed immediately.

Key internal property elements to review during these assessments include entryways, floors, stairs, hallways, handrails, pews, stages, platforms, risers and communal spaces (e.g., bathrooms and kitchens). In particular, areas with steep elevation changes or variations in floor materials should be carefully evaluated for slip, trip and fall hazards.

Vital external property elements to review during these assessments include sidewalks, parking lots, entry steps, ramps, curbs, drainage areas and recreational spaces (e.g., lawns and patios). Specifically, areas with uneven or unstable ground should be closely monitored for slip, trip and fall hazards.

### Practicing Good Housekeeping

In addition to conducting risk assessments, religious organizations must practice proper housekeeping. Doing so can ensure an organized and clean property, reducing potential obstacles and related slip, trip and fall hazards.

Here are some housekeeping best practices to implement:

- Utilize a routine cleaning regimen to ensure all walkways are kept clear of clutter and debris. Select an employee (or group of employees) to be in charge of this regimen.
- Refrain from leaving extension cords exposed in heavily trafficked walkways, as these cords could pose tripping hazards. Be sure to cover extension cords with cord concealers and cable ties, or move them out of walkways altogether (if possible).

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Further, consider reaching out to a licensed electrician to discuss permanent solutions for limiting extension cord usage.

- Have a plan in place to identify and clean up spills as quickly and efficiently as possible. Designated employees should be alerted to rope off the area and remove the mess when spills occur. The affected area should stay roped off until it is completely dry.
- Conduct daily walkthroughs of the property to remedy any housekeeping needs before officially opening the doors.

## Maintaining Walking Surfaces and Equipment

Ensuring safe walking surfaces and on-site equipment is another key aspect of mitigating slip, trip and fall hazards. In order to properly preserve such surfaces and equipment, religious organizations should uphold these measures:

- Clean floors and stairs on a routine basis. Keep in mind that cleaning methods may vary between floor and stair materials.
- Inspect floors and stairs periodically for potential damages (e.g., cracked tiles or lifted wood). Perform maintenance as needed.
- Consider placing nonslip rugs in areas with uneven or slippery walking surfaces. Make sure these rugs remain flat on the ground. Clean and inspect these rugs regularly, watching for tears and curled edges. Replace damaged or worn rugs as needed.
- Inspect external walking surfaces, such as curbs, sidewalks, entry steps, ramps, patios and parking lots, for potential hazards (e.g., potholes, cracks, debris, pooling water and steep elevation changes) on a routine basis. Make repairs when necessary to keep these surfaces as smooth and level as possible.
- Equip all stairs and steps with proper handrails. These handrails should be sturdy and measure an appropriate height. Inspect these handrails

periodically, performing maintenance and making replacements as needed.

- Maintain all on-site equipment (e.g., ladders, step stools, platforms and risers). Require employees and community members to inspect this equipment for damage before use. Repair and replace equipment when necessary.

## Ensuring Visibility

Maintaining adequate visibility is essential in preventing slip, trip and fall hazards. In order to do so, religious organizations should make sure all internal and external areas with frequent foot traffic, including entryways, hallways, stairs, steps, sidewalks, patios and parking lots, are appropriately lit. Adequate lighting in these areas will help employees and community members see where they are walking and steer clear of any hazards in their path. Additionally, religious organizations should consider marking changes in surface elevation throughout their properties with brightly colored paint or reflective tape.

## Staying Compliant

Religious organizations can further enhance their properties and protect against slip, trip and fall hazards by staying compliant with applicable building codes and accessibility standards. Specifically, religious organizations should ensure various property elements (e.g., floors, steps and stairs) meet the requirements outlined in their respective state and local building codes. Such codes are intended to promote the safe construction of buildings.

Furthermore, certain property elements should be in place to promote accessibility—namely, ramps and handrails. These elements must comply with the guidelines provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It's best to consult legal counsel to determine specific building code and ADA compliance measures. If religious organizations need to make property changes to maintain compliance, they should work with trusted and qualified contractors for assistance.

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## Addressing Seasonal Hazards

It's important to note that different seasons bring varying slip, trip and fall hazards. For instance, winter is often accompanied by icy conditions, while autumn is associated with an abundance of leaves on the ground—both of which pose safety concerns.

Here's what religious organizations can do to minimize seasonal exposures:

- Create a snow and ice removal plan for the winter months. This plan should involve having designated, qualified employees or hired professionals shovel snow and de-ice external walking surfaces as needed.
- Establish a leaf removal plan for the autumn months. This plan should include having designated, qualified employees or hired professionals rake and dispose of fallen leaves throughout the property when necessary.
- Maintain proper landscaping across the property during the spring and summer months. This entails having designated, qualified employees or hired professionals cut the grass regularly, remove accumulations of greenery (e.g., weeds, algae and moss) from external walking surfaces and dispose of any lawn debris (e.g., grass clippings and fallen tree branches). If the property has a cemetery on-site, make sure these landscaping efforts extend to that area. Repair broken or damaged graves and headstones as needed.
- Make sure adequate supplies are available on-site for snow and ice removal, leaf removal and landscaping operations. These supplies may include shovels, salt, sand, rakes and trimmers, among others.
- Consider placing nonslip, water-resistant mats at all entryways to collect excess moisture that employees and community members may carry in on their shoes from heavy rain or snow. Keep these mats in good condition.

- Inspect all property drainage systems to ensure they aren't causing water or ice buildup on-site. If any problems arise, consult a trusted and qualified contractor to make repairs.
- Have the roof and pipes assessed regularly to look for signs of leaking, as these leaks could lead to floor moisture and subsequent slip, trip and fall hazards. If any issues are detected, have them fixed immediately.

## Utilizing Safety Signage

Lastly, religious organizations should highlight their commitment to safety and communicate proper slip, trip and fall prevention strategies on-site by leveraging property signage. This signage may include warning posters in areas with uneven ground or bulletins asking employees and community members to walk carefully rather than run on-site. Further, religious organizations may want to post signage encouraging employees and community members to wear safe, nonslip shoes on the property for added protection.

## Conclusion

Overall, it's evident that slip, trip and fall incidents are a significant concern for religious organizations. By implementing effective prevention strategies, these organizations can limit potential incidents, thus preventing associated injuries and liability concerns.

For more risk management guidance, contact us today.

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