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DEFENSE COMMUNITIES

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Defense Communities magazine is designed to keep those who operate and manage the whole spectrum of military housing and facilities maintenance informed on the industry's latest technology, products, and services. It provides a forum for members to share lessons learned, news and events, and training opportunities and updates.



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NEXT EDITORIAL DEADLINE:

March/April: February 18

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Ensuring Maintenance Worker Safety

Three simple tips help technicians avoid on-the-job injuries

By Paul Rhodes

The volume of safety information that a maintenance technician must have is huge. After all, maintenance technicians have an extremely dangerous job. They may have to handle hazardous elements such as chemicals, electricity, or the goop left over in a resident's sink. They frequently must move heavy objects such as a refrigerator from one third-floor apartment to another. And many times they have to act quickly to complete all of these tasks in time for a move-in.

Learning maintenance safety often comes from the proverbial trial-by-error method. However, to help avoid dangerous errors, here are three important safety suggestions.

1. Establish emergency communications

With their varying daily tasks, maintenance technicians often are unaware of what is happening elsewhere in the community. Conversely, other staff members often are unaware of what might be happening to the technicians, who must regularly handle duties that can cause injury or even death. To ensure their safety, maintenance technicians should have some idea of where others are if they need assistance, and other staff



members should know where the technicians are in case they go missing.

At one community, staff members are encouraged to make an announcement over the radio if they need others to be aware of a potentially dangerous situation. For example, maintenance technicians who are going to be conducting electrical work will announce that they are "code one in Number 402." By announcing this on

the radio, the maintenance supervisor knows that a member of his staff will be in unit 402 performing potentially dangerous electrical work, and that if the supervisor does not hear from that technician in the near future, it would be wise to check on him or her.

2. Determine safe alternatives

At a seminar on swimming pool operations, a chemist discussed dangerous

chemicals. She disclosed that the most dangerous chemical is not found in the pool pump room. Instead, it is under the residents' sinks and on the shelves in the community's maintenance shops: drain cleaner.

Although drain cleaner is the only way to get a drain unclogged in some cases, maintenance technicians should start with an alternative that is less dangerous to them and to the environment. Often, a technician can free a garbage disposal that is clogged with rice or potatoes with the proper use of a plunger. In such a case, put the plunger in the sink and carefully release the air trapped in the water from under the plunger's bell. Using a pulling motion, with one hand on the bell holding it to the sink, bring the handle toward you. This may dislodge the obstruction.

Technicians also can use this procedure in the vanity sink and tub, as long as they block the overflow. A pipe snake or the sink stopper itself may also be used to unclog numerous problems. Avoiding drain cleaner is just one example of how a maintenance technician can complete a repair using a safer alternative.

3. Utilize protective layers

For a maintenance technician, "insulation" can be anything that protects him or her from harmful elements. It might be the safety glasses or goggles that they wear when cutting keys on the key machine, the rubber gloves they use when changing a resident's toilet seat, or the dust masks they use when they blow the breezeways clean. It's the thick plastic that covers a pair of lineman's pliers and separates the technician from a live circuit, or the volt sensor pen that helps to determine whether they flipped the wrong breaker.

In any case, insulation is important because it separates and protects technicians from dangerous conditions. ■

Paul Rhodes, CAMT, has worked as an Apartment Maintenance Supervisor for several communities in the Atlanta area. Currently, he is a Lead Customer Training Instructor for HD Supply. Reach him at Paul.Rhodes@hdsupply.com.



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