

Protecting Against Slips and Falls

By Gary Erickson

Nearly 12 million people slip and fall each year in the United States. And the majority of those seek medical attention because of their injuries.

According to the National Safety Council, falls are the leading cause of visits to the emergency room. Worse yet, falls are the second leading cause of accidental death in this country, behind motor vehicle accidents.



The number of falls is growing as the population ages, because older people are most likely to experience these types of accidents. The number of falls that occur at financial institutions is also growing.

Slip and fall accidents can be very costly for banks. They accounted for 7.9 percent of bank insurance claim costs between 1999 and 2003, according to loss data gathered by St. Paul Travelers. The average claim exceeded \$9,500.

Overall, slips and falls accounted for 14 percent of the claims filed by financial institutions to insurance companies during that period. About 60 percent of the paid claims for financial institutions involved slip and fall accidents by customers. The remaining 40 percent concerned claims from bank employees.

How can a financial institution protect itself and its customers from the costs associated with slips and falls? The first step is to institute a risk management program that includes slip and fall prevention.

A bank can reduce the risk of slip and fall accidents by doing the following.

Develop a slip and fall prevention policy. A prevention policy provides guidance and support to management and employees. It should contain a general statement of intent, and list those within the organization that are responsible for health and safety. The document should be distributed to employees, and updated as needed.

Analyze losses resulting from slips and falls to measure the program's effectiveness. It is important to take note of the slip and fall accidents that have already occurred at your facility. Analyzing past accidents can help pinpoint future trends and prioritize prevention efforts. Information about slip and fall hazards, accident costs, and prevention measures should be shared with employees and a safety committee (if applicable) on a regular basis.

Design and maintain the bank's property to reduce the potential for slips and falls. Evaluating the condition and design of your building is an integral part of a slip and fall prevention program. Our loss information indicates that 82 percent of slip and fall acci-

dents occur in one of the following areas: floors/walkways—hard surface (33 percent), floors/walkways—carpet (22 percent), stairs (18 percent), and parking lots (9 percent).

The property should be designed and maintained to lessen the potential for slips and falls. Simple improvements such as keeping hedges and bushes trimmed around walkways can help reduce these hazards. Make sure access points, such as curbs, ramps, and elevators, are easy to navigate.

Implement good housekeeping practices. The interior of your facility should be properly and regularly cleaned. This includes sweeping and mopping floors during low traffic times and posting “wet floor” signs to alert the public to the hazard. The exterior of your facility needs maintenance, too. Keep sidewalks clear of snow and ice. In addition, building entrances and exits should be well lit.

Institute periodic inspections to help identify and correct slip and fall hazards. Conducting periodic walkthroughs—both inside and outside your facility—is necessary to ensure that the property is in safe condition.

Educate employees about slip and fall hazards. Employee support of a slip

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and fall prevention program is critical to its success. Employees need to be educated about the factors that can contribute to slips and falls, and the prevention measures that can reduce the likelihood of these accidents occurring at your facility. Employees should be empowered to take the steps necessary to correct a potential slip and fall situation if and when it arises.

Conduct thorough accident investigations. Accident investigation procedures should be implemented immediately if a slip and fall accident occurs. Create an accident investigation kit that includes forms, a camera, a pen, and tape to mark the area, if necessary. A prompt and thorough investigation may help reduce the severity of the claim and help prevent future claims. In

addition, the knowledge gained from accident investigations will enable you to correct any deficiencies in your slip and fall prevention program.

Become proactive about slips and falls. As litigation and health care costs continue to rise, it's a good idea for financial institutions to become proactive about slip and fall accidents by implementing an effective risk management program. Having the proper insurance coverage in place is helpful, but even so, the hidden costs associated with slips and falls can be significant.

Financial institutions need to try to prevent these accidents from happening in the first place. That will not only reduce a bank's insurance costs, but also help protect the reputation it has built with its customers. **15**

All opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author. Gary Erickson is assistant vice president of financial and professional services with St. Paul Travelers, an ACB Business Partner.

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