

10 Actions to Help Prevent Dorm Closures Due to Mold

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In the fall of 2018, at least 10 colleges and universities had to deal with the negative publicity associated with educational institutions failing to provide safe and healthy living environments for their students.

Managing Elevated Relative Humidity and Moisture in Dormitories

Mold issues in at least ten college dormitories in the U.S. during a wet and humid semester in the fall of 2018 resulted in multiple lawsuits and had administrators addressing reported health complaints. Colleges and universities scrambled to find temporary housing, clean impacted building surfaces and contents, and prevent further building damage such as rust, damaged ceiling tiles, and buckling of wooden floors. The institutions also had to deal with the negative publicity associated with educational institutions failing to provide safe and healthy living environments for their students.

Malfunctioning or outdated heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems were to blame in many cases. A combination of external humidity coupled with occupant-generated moisture – such as steam generated from a shower – led to interior conditions that were ripe for mold growth.

The mold situation that arose last year is not a one-time event. However, facilities managers and students can take steps to help combat mold and make student housing a healthy environment for residents. The following page lists five actions that each group can take.

Five Actions That Building Administrators Can Take:

1. Controlling moisture to prevent mold growth. If any area has experienced water intrusion, it is critical to immediately fix the water or moisture problem and clean-up the water within 24-48 hours to avoid the potential of mold growth. Fix any leaks in the building envelope (windows, walls, and roof) as soon as possible.
2. Engaging a certified HVAC contractor to ensure that units condition the outside air to an acceptable level of relative humidity within American National Standards Institute (ANSI)/American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) guidelines. ANSI/ASHRAE 62.1-2016, Ventilation for Acceptable Indoor Air Quality specifies that mechanical systems with dehumidification capability should be designed to maintain relative humidity at less than 65%. The United States Environmental Protection Agency's Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings Guide states that in order to prevent mold, building owners should "maintain low indoor humidity, below 60% relative humidity (RH), ideally 30-50%, if possible." Preventative maintenance of all air-handling units, including monthly filter changes, checking condensate pans, and other system maintenance, should be performed by the HVAC contractor.
3. Monitoring relative humidity inside buildings using existing HVAC equipment, handheld meters, or fixed sensors. Fixed sensors for temperature, relative humidity, or leak detection are available that can provide cell-phone alerts to maintenance personnel. Mechanical engineers should also be consulted to evaluate the pressurization of the building, and determine the root cause for the elevated relative humidity (e.g., moisture in air from fresh air intake, infiltration of outdoor air into buildings, etc.).
4. Installing commercial-grade, self-draining dehumidification units in areas with the highest occupancy. Additional units in common areas and rooms should be added as necessary in order to reduce indoor relative humidity below 60%.
5. Insulating piping properly to prevent condensation and dripping onto building materials.

Five Actions That Students Can Take:

1. Keeping windows and doors closed in damp or rainy weather conditions, and keeping all wall and floor vents unblocked and unrestricted.
2. Removing carpet and upholstered materials easily susceptible to mold growth, and avoiding overfilling closets or storage areas with clothes or other furnishings.
3. Using any pre-installed fan when bathing/showering, and allowing the fan to run until all excess moisture has vented from the bathroom.
4. Drying excess moisture that has gathered on the fixtures after using the shower or sink, and regularly using a household cleaner, to ensure a sanitary environment.
5. Report any water problems, HVAC issues, or musty odors in a timely manner by submitting a maintenance request.

Educating the facilities and maintenance staff, as well as students, on how to prevent or address mold can mitigate the need for an often costly response to mold, including relocation of students, and the negative publicity associated with the problem.

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