

School Janitorial and Custodial Services

School custodial services include school employees and private firms that are hired to clean schools. This industry generally works year round performing services consisting of cleaning operations such as vacuuming, sweeping, emptying trash, dusting, sanitizing, and restocking bathrooms. Each of these operations have some hazards and can result in work-related injuries and illnesses.

Injuries sustained by custodial personnel can be rooted in a lack of adequate material handling equipment, poor condition of equipment, inexperience, unsafe acts, or inadequate training. Common injuries associated with the custodial duties are:

- Back injuries, sprains, and bruises from slips, trips, and falls
- Strains and sprains from heavy or awkward materials handling
- Repetitive motion injuries
- Inhalation and absorption hazards from mixing or contact with chemicals
- Cuts and lacerations
- Disease from exposure to bloodborne pathogens

General Exposure Controls

Research shows that new employees on a job are most susceptible to having an accident during their first 90 days of employment. These accidents are reduced or eliminated as the employee gains experience and becomes more familiar with his/her environment and its hazards. It is important to take additional measures to ensure that new employees are made aware of potential hazards

and are closely supervised so they learn to recognize hazards and understand what to do to avoid them.

Management support and direction is the key to creating a safe working environment. If all workers have a clear understanding of management's commitment to safety then they will recognize that shortcuts or working in a hazardous manner to complete a job quickly is a poor decision and one that will not be condoned. They will also understand the importance of correcting any hazards they see, and if they cannot personally address the problem, reporting the problem to management.

Workers need effective training on the tasks they perform, equipment they use, and hazards associated with their jobs. There may be a language barrier so management must be sure to address all safety issues and training needs in both oral and written communication - to be sure all employees are reached.

Employees should be trained in the care and use of the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) for the job, as well as how to obtain information from Material Safety Data Sheets, and the proper way to label secondary containers.

Slips, Trips and Falls

Slips, trips, and falls are a common custodial injury. The majority of these injuries are the result of slipping on wet surfaces.

The following checklist should assist in identifying and eliminating slip, trip, and fall hazards during operations.

- Keep the work area clean and free of debris, spilled materials, etc.
- Clean up spills as quickly as possible
- Keep work area floors clean and dry to the extent possible
- Mark newly waxed or wet floors with proper caution signs
- Be sure workers always wear slip resistant shoes
- Keep electrical and telephone cords out of walkways
- Eliminate obstructions that restrict or block free movement in aisles, stairs, and walkways; such as hoses, cables, paper, furniture, extension cords, equipment, containers, books, boxes, and other items
- Keep the floor and floor coverings in good condition
- Use ladders correctly
- Use tool belts to carry tools up ladders
- Maintain adequate lighting to increase visibility and decrease risk of injury

Strains and Sprains

Some tasks require workers to carry or move awkward and heavy equipment. The best way to reduce risk of injury is through the use of appropriate material handling equipment. Train employees on appropriate body mechanics when lifting, lowering, pushing, pulling, and carrying. More importantly, all employees should be trained and required to use the material handling equipment that is available such as desk movers, chair movers, dollies, carts, and lift trucks.

If new employees have any pre-existing conditions affecting their ability to perform essential job functions, they should consult with their supervisor on the job tasks they can perform. When there is a need to lift or move heavy equipment, workers should be encouraged to ask for assistance if a mechanical device is not available.

Repetitive Motion Injuries

Employees who work with vibrating, heavy equipment on a daily basis may face repetitive motion injuries. This may also result from performing work while standing, sitting, or kneeling in awkward positions for extended periods of time. Equipment such as floor buffers, which transmit vibration, should be assessed prior to use to engineer out any possible vibration hazards. One approach to avoiding adverse effects from these situations and equipment is to rotate job tasks between workers so that no single person will be exposed for an extended length of time.

Inhalation and Skin Contact

Exposure to industrial cleaning agents may cause injury and/or illness. The majority of cleaning solutions used by custodial services may only cause skin irritation, however, there are various agents that may also be corrosive or an inhalation hazard. Solutions used for floor cleaning and stripping pose a significant risk of adverse health effects to custodial workers. Mixing certain cleaning agents may also result in hazardous gases, so workers should be cautioned against mixing certain incompatible chemicals together (such as products containing chlorine or ammonia). Cleaning products may be purchased in large containers and then transferred into smaller ones, so it is important that all employees are instructed on how to properly label secondary containers to avoid using the wrong chemical.

Recommended actions that should help prevent injury and illness include:

- Conduct a hazard assessment of the environment and chemicals being used to determine PPE use
- Fit and train workers on the proper selection, use, and maintenance of PPE; including respiratory protection, proper footwear, eye, face, and hand protection
- Educate workers about the hazards associated with each chemical they might use and how to adequately protect themselves against overexposure

- Communicate information on manufacturer warning labels and mixing instructions to workers
- Ensure that work areas are well ventilated during the mixing and application of solutions

Bloodborne Pathogens

All employees in the school custodial service are at risk of exposure to blood or other potentially infectious materials as part of their routine job duties. The risk of exposure is higher when cleaning up infectious spills, changing trash bags, and cleaning restrooms. Employees should be trained on what to look for, how to protect themselves, and how to properly report any exposures.

The following checklist should assist in identifying and preventing Bloodborne pathogen hazards during operations.

- Provide secondary containment for all liquid hazardous wastes
- Fill out “Hazardous Waste” labels completely
- Be sure that waste containers are compatible with the stored waste and readily visible
- Tightly cover and seal waste containers
- Store incompatible wastes separately from other wastes
- Store liquid flammable wastes in approved *flammable* containers
- Store materials in a secure and orderly manner
- Ensure that receptacles for solid or liquid waste are easy to clean and maintained in a sanitary condition
- Remove all wastes as often as necessary, without creating a nuisance or health menace
- Ensure that all work areas and other rooms are constructed, equipped, and maintained to prevent the entrance or harborage of rodents, insects, and other vermin

Additional Hazards

Electrical Hazards

Working with electrical equipment can present shock hazards. All electrical equipment should be inspected for missing ground prongs, exposed wires, and damaged insulation prior to use. If there are any defects, the worker should tag the equipment “out of service,” report the condition to their supervisor, and not attempt any repairs.

All employees should be trained and familiar with safety-related work practices for electrical equipment. Workers should also be trained to recognize and understand the importance of lockout/tagout procedures and take all necessary precautions prior to beginning work. If anyone on the custodial staff must dismantle powered equipment for cleaning or other purposes, lockout procedures should be followed.

The following checklist should assist in identifying and eliminating electrical hazards during operations.

- Check all electrical equipment for loose or broken wiring or defects prior to use
- Clearly mark any damaged equipment as “out of service”
- Use all cords safely to prevent damage or electrical overload

Fire Hazards

Although most work does not present a high risk of fire hazards, the worker should still be trained on emergency procedures. Custodial workers should know the locations of alarm stations, fire extinguishers, and emergency exits. The custodial service should also have first aid kits in all vehicles.

Storage Areas

Most school custodial services will store supplies in a locked, separate room or storage closet. In addition to conforming to local fire codes, the workers should follow good storage practices to avoid any fire hazards. Chemical corrosives should be stored separately from flammables, in a corrosive-liquids cabinet or designated room.

Flammable liquids should be stored in approved containers for flammable liquids and in UL approved flammable liquids cabinets in accordance with OSHA requirements. Store ordinary combustible materials such as files, records, and trash separately from flammable liquids.

The following checklist should assist in identifying and preventing hazards from improper storage.

- Store materials in cabinets neatly and safely. If materials are not reachable from the ground, provide a step stool
- Be sure that free-standing, open metal shelving units are stable and secured to the wall
- Store bottles on shelves at or below eye level
- Be sure that shelving has sufficient capacity to bear the load safely
- Provide secure storage of flammable liquids in approved containers and cabinets
- Keep tops of cabinets free of stored items that might cause injury if they fell
- Keep materials stable, and piled no higher than 70 inches
- Store heavy objects at mid range (30 to 50 inches)
- Properly secure equipment that is capable of causing a hazard if knocked over

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