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Creating a Safe Christmas Celebration

The  Photo of a woman with a Christmas tree in the background holidays certainly are a wonderful time of year—they are typically greatly anticipated periods during the year full of traditions and revelry. During these joyous times, it is important for individuals and organizations to maintain a clear focus on safety-related matters and not forget to use common sense and good judgment when transforming their properties into “winter wonderlands.”

It is important to promote a festive atmosphere to celebrate certain times of the year in accordance with established societal norms. In doing so, it is essential to ensure that the end result is not a hazardous condition or environment that jeopardizes the safety of building occupants, conflicts with applicable safety codes and best practices, or impedes emergency responders from gaining access to a property during an emergency situation or potential crisis.

Occasionally, people can lose sight of safety when trying to create a “special effect” that promotes a Christmas or seasonal theme. This can be especially true when those involved with the decorating process may not be directly responsible for safety compliance.

While every member of an organization should have a clear understanding of their obligation and responsibility of acting in a safe manner, this fact sometimes gets lost when trying to visualize and achieve a goal that is above and beyond what is considered routine. For example, the lobby of a business does not normally include a tree, but may have one during the Christmas season. It is important to ensure that the presence of such an item does not compromise safety in any capacity. There are five important areas of concern that can compromise safety during the Christmas and seasonal celebrations. These areas include: electricity, exits, live decorations, open flame, and fire protection systems. The following tips address these areas and are designed to help ensure that you have created a safe Christmas celebration.

- Use common sense when setting up electric decorations. If it looks unsafe, it probably is. Do not get carried away with extension cords and only use approved outlet strips or surge protectors with built-in circuit breakers to safely expand the use of your building’s electrical system.
- Thoroughly inspect Christmas light strands and electronic decorations before use to ensure that they are properly functioning and undamaged. It is better to discard and replace damaged/old light strands and decorations rather than trying to repair them. Their age and deteriorating condition often represents potential electrical shock or fire hazards.
- Do not compromise the means of egress in hallways, lobbies and near exit doors with Christmas trees, religious scenes, and other decorations. Items placed in the means of egress

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can severely reduce exit capacity and places building occupants at risk should an emergency situation of a facility be required. Furthermore, any combustible items within the means of egress provide an additional fire load in a building and may be considered a fire code violation. OSHA general industry standard 1910.32(A) (1) states, "Exit routes must be kept free of explosive or highly flammable furnishings or other decorations."

- Candles must be used in accordance with all applicable codes, regulations, and best practices. A good tip to remember is to NEVER leave a candle unattended.
- Fireplaces are another open flame hazard that can cause a potential fire. It is important to ensure that all screens and guards are in place around the fireplace opening whenever a fire is lit in the fire box.
- Keep combustible materials like gift wrapping and decorations away from the fireplace as radiant and convection heat can raise the temperature of the material near the fire box to its ignition point and start a fire.
- Soft materials like wrapping paper, cardboard boxes, plastics and newspaper do not burn efficiently and emit large volumes of smoke and embers that fail to get hot enough to vent out of the top of the chimney or flue stack. As these embers rise and cool they attach themselves to the inside wall of the stack in the form of a creosote-type material that is flammable and in some cases, ignites and causes a chimney fire. To avoid this hazard, fireplaces, chimneys and flue pipes should be regularly cleaned and maintained in a fire-safe condition to help eliminate the possibility of fire.
- For occupancies that have battery-operated, single station smoke detectors, it is important to maintain the devices in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. Perform tests on these devices on a regular basis and change the batteries to help ensure that they are always operational.
- Do not use fire alarm and fire suppression system components such as manual pull stations, horn/strobe devices, fire sprinkler heads and ceiling-mounted detectors as anchor points for Christmas decorations. For example, a smoke detector or sprinkler head on the ceiling in a room should not be used to hang the mistletoe. These devices must be maintained in a condition that is free of all potential obstructions that may compromise their performance.

During the Christmas season, buildings are often considered to be at greater risk for fire. It is essential to ensure that all fire detection and fire suppression systems are operational and un-compromised to help ensure that they function properly during an emergency.

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