

Appliances & Personal Heaters in County Facilities

CTSI recommends extreme caution in determining how and where small appliances and personal heaters are used in county facilities. These items can cause fires by overloading a facility's electrical system. We recommend members enlist the help and guidance of a facilities professional or licensed electrician and suggest the following steps be used as a starting point in managing this considerable risk:

- Electrical appliances should be restricted to a centrally located kitchen or break areas, limiting the number needed to serve employees in any building or facility adequately. Personal appliance use outside this central area is discouraged.
- The number and type of appliances will depend on the number of users but might include one or more commercial-grade coffee makers, a single toaster, and microwaves. All should be equipped with appropriate protective circuitry from the manufacturer.
- Newer appliances have protective circuitry such as auto shutoff and fail-safe breakers incorporated into them by the manufacturer. These disable the device if it is tipped over, overheats, or otherwise malfunctions and are highly recommended.
- Wiring in the area where the appliances are located should be equipped with grounded outlets and 20-amp breakers that are professionally installed. A facilities professional or licensed electrician should determine if the number and type of devices can be handled by the area's circuits.
- Limit the use of extension cords and prohibit plug multipliers. If the number of appliances in a designated centrally located area requires additional outlets, these need to be professionally engineered and installed.
- If the centrally located kitchen or break area has a sink, all electrical outlets within six feet of that sink must be protected by a Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter (GFCI).
- A facilities official or a specifically designated person(s) should check the cooking area at the end of each workday to assure all appliances are turned off. It is extremely important this check be extended to weekends and holidays, especially if employees are allowed flexible work schedules.
- Personal heaters should be considered extreme fire hazards. CTSI does not recommend the use of personal heaters; however, if allowed, these must be equipped with protective circuitry to guard against tip-over and overheating. Older models seldom have these features. If allowed, keep these devices in the open, away from combustibles. Arrange for periodic monitoring by a facilities official. Personal heaters should never be plugged into a power strip and should be the only item plugged into a wall outlet because they can handle higher wattage. They should be unplugged at the end of the day.
- Candles or similar items with open flames should be forbidden in all county facilities.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR COUNTIES

Many counties operate in buildings that were wired before the advent of computers, microwaves, and other power-hungry modern devices. Counties should ensure that small appliances have up-to-date safety features and should be unplugged overnight and weekends. If you have any doubts, it is best to have a professional electrician perform this calculation for commercial buildings. For more information, contact CTSI at 303 861 0507.