

Meet the Challenge: Follow the EPA to Clean Air Guidelines

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There is nothing as important as the air we breathe. But while we can't live without it, air is sometimes the very thing that makes us sick. From COVID-19 to seasonal allergies and the common cold, so many unpleasant or dangerous illnesses are carried on the air.

This makes enclosed indoor spaces particularly treacherous when it comes to staying healthy, as the lack of places for air to escape means contaminated air particles build up over time. Some microbes can live on a droplet in the air for hours, turning a poorly ventilated room into a breathing hazard, especially for seniors.

In March of 2022, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a Clean Air Buildings Challenge to all building owners and operators to reduce risks from airborne viruses and other contaminants indoors. COVID-19 made it imperative for operators to create an action plan to optimize fresh air ventilation, cleaning and filtration, and the EPA is now encouraging a proactive response to cleaning up our indoor air.

For the owners and investors in seniors housing properties, complying with this challenge will not only make residents safer and healthier, but will pay dividends in satisfaction and public relations. And if we act now, the next potential pandemic will be much easier to deal with.

EPA guidance

As part of the Clean Air Buildings Challenge, the EPA has set out a point-by-point guide for building owners, investors and operators in preparing their properties. Each of these steps is vitally important for successfully meeting the challenge, but senior living facilities may have their own obstacles to overcome or best practices to implement.

By looking at each part of the EPA's plan, those of us responsible for housing seniors can best prepare for these particular circumstances and meet the EPA's challenge.

Plan ahead

Strategizing is always the first part of meeting a challenge, and the EPA recommends building owners create an action plan for clean indoor air. This plan should assess the property's inner air quality, plan for upgrades and improvements, and account for necessary heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) inspections and maintenance to keep equipment running smoothly.

Owners should understand how clean outdoor air is brought into the building and account for residents who prefer to keep their doors closed. The ventilation system should be clearly diagrammed, with CO2 monitors distributed liberally throughout the building. Finally, the clean air plan should include scheduled inspections and maintenance to ensure all resident seniors remain safe.

Don't be stingy with ventilation

The most successful building owners in addressing the EPA's challenge will be those who understand how to optimize fresh air ventilation by circulating clean air from outdoors. After ensuring the air coming in from outside is free of pollutants or harmful particles, determine which windows are safest to keep open.

With seniors on the premises, too many windows open at once can create a draft and lead to people catching colds, so it is good to establish a minimum number of windows to open, as well as a maximum for when air quality trumps temperature in terms of keeping residents safe — such as during times of disease outbreak.

Focus on filtration

While natural ventilation through windows is important, the key ingredient in any modern ventilation plan is a state-of-the-art HVAC system. Determining how best to let in fresh air is good, but having an automated system that draws in the clean air and pumps out the bad while filtering out any harmful particles is absolutely necessary.

The layout and functionality of an HVAC system should factor both into initial plans and ventilation optimization. The owners and operators of seniors housing should be especially conscious of using such systems to keep spaces comfortable in common spaces and customizable in private ones.

HVAC also plays a central role in keeping the air in a facility clear of harmful bacteria. Diseases like COVID-19 are transmitted on water droplets too small for most HVAC filters to catch. In senior living facilities especially, owners need to invest in surgical-grade air filtration systems that can catch and cleanse the smallest particles to minimize the chances of disease transmission.

Without proper HVAC filtration, senior communities can quickly become hotbeds for illnesses, as we tragically saw when COVID took such a heavy toll among our senior citizens in elder housing. Surgical-grade HVAC systems will pay for themselves in lives saved and liability avoided.

Outreach for engagement

Any ventilation plan, no matter how brilliant or efficient, needs the engagement of its community to succeed. In this case, it is vital to communicate the ventilation plan and its best practices to both the seniors living onsite and the workers who maintain the property so that they can help meet the EPA's challenge.

Everyone in the building should understand what action steps management is taking to improve air quality and reduce disease transmission. It may be necessary to host building walkthroughs, and to film these for those residents who have trouble walking long distances. Finally, make sure residents have a way to provide feedback and request maintenance and repairs. One's own lodgers are often the most vigilant source of insight on how to upgrade a system.

The EPA challenge is more than just good advice. The agency has provided property owners with a comprehensive guide on how to make these necessary and useful changes.

While senior living facilities have unique needs and circumstances, these goals should be easily attainable with a smart plan, surgical-quality HVAC systems, and the help and engagement of one's residents, whose wellbeing these standards were created to protect.

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