HOW TO CREATE A CLEANING AND TESTING PROCEDURE FOR CORONAVIRUS (SARS-COV-2) IN YOUR BUILDING?

The coronavirus pandemic has impacted every person and business in the United States, and the risks for infection and liability are still poorly understood. Many of our clients have been asking for guidance or protocols on what they should do to clean and sanitize their buildings. While full and formal procedures have not yet been adopted on a national level, every building operator or manager should begin to evaluate and create their own plan. This brief article should help you get started.

IDENTIFY THE STAKEHOLDERS IN THE CLEANING AND TESTING PLAN:

Determining the key stakeholders at your location who will guide you to who needs to be consulted as you develop your plan. Schools, Universities and manufacturing facilities may need to consult with their relevant labor union representatives. Cities, counties, and other municipalities may need to consult their risk management division. Some private businesses may have an internal EHS or safety team, and others may need to consult their insurance provider. Getting to the core of who ultimately holds the responsibility and decision-making power will ensure that your plan is well-received and carries the full weight of your company or ownership.

IDENTIFY THE TYPE OF BUILDING AND OCCUPANT USE PATTERNS:

The types of structures needing cleaning and verification include apartment buildings, high-rise office towers, strip-malls, retail parks, medical buildings, labs, schools, hospitals and any other type of facility that you could imagine. Each of these buildings will need a different plan for Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) cleaning and testing. The first step is to determine what type of building you are managing, and how it is used by occupants.

- Is this an apartment building with many common areas accessible to residents?
- Is this a pharmacy that is open to the public?
- Is it a lab facility that has highly restricted access and 24 hour security?

Determining who has access to each area (general public, all occupants, restricted few occupants) will help you to decide how frequently these areas need to be sanitized and disinfected.

IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT:

Building operators, managers, and maintenance staff may want to discuss what types of protective equipment they are requiring for the people that enter the building. Some businesses may have protocols that can easily be adapted to this new reality, such as a lab or clinic where masks and gloves were already common. Other facilities such as retail and office spaces, may not be able to enforce these requirements. As the person responsible, you may also advise that areas with restricted access enforce the use of gloves and masks, while publicly accessible areas do not require this personal protective equipment. The fact that these supplies are in extreme demand and hard to acquire will also be very likely to play into your final decision.

IDENTIFY OPPORTUNITIES TO RESTRICT ACCESS

Many of the buildings in the United States already have stringent security and access requirements. These buildings will already have a plan in place for the secure areas, but you may want to revisit that plan to help enforce social distancing guidelines. The areas of your property that must remain open to the public may be further restricted in use to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. These restrictions may include limiting the number of occupants at any one time, or placing markers on the floor to help customers stand at least 6 feet from each other.

IDENTIFY AREAS FOR ADVANCED AIR FILTRATION

As the building owner or operator, you probably know a decent amount about the HVAC system and the way that air is distributed in the building. Revisiting the system and trying to prevent recirculation when possible is certainly a good idea. Opening fresh-air intake dampers to 100% may prevent the mixing of air in the building, which could transfer the droplets that carry infection to other adjacent spaces. If your building does not have the ability to restrict recirculation, then installing portable HEPA filters may be of benefit. The CDC suggests the use of these in areas with infected people.

DETERMINE WHO WILL BE CLEANING AND WHAT PRODUCTS TO USE

Many buildings have an existing contract with a janitorial company. This company already has access to your building and knows the layout. Contacting that janitorial company to get a written procedure on how they are cleaning and what products they are using. If your janitorial company is closed or unable to clean for the coronavirus, there are many restoration companies that have begun to offer this service. For your protection, all products used for these purposes should be EPA approved for the disinfection of viruses.

IDENTIFY HIGH CONTACT SURFACES

The CDC has issued extensive guidelines on what areas should be cleaned, and a special focus has been put on high contact surfaces, also called high touch surfaces. These include, but are not limited to:

- Tables
- Doorknobs
- light switches
- countertops
- handles
- desks
- phones
- keyboards
- toilets
- faucets
- sinks

CREATE A TESTING PLAN TO ENSURE THAT CLEANING AND DISINFECTION HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT SUCCESSFULLY

The employees and other occupants of your buildings are experiencing the same fears and concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic as the rest of the world. Communicating to them that you are taking proactive action, and verifying those actions with quality control testing can help alleviate some of these fears. Once you have enacted your cleaning and disinfection procedures, it is important to perform some testing that can verify these surfaces have been adequately addressed. These tests are quite simple to collect, and can help you create a history of compliance with cleaning guidelines and appropriate laboratory verification. Surface testing for coronavirus can be done to measure the amounts of living bacteria that comes from a human source or can be done to determine if any of the genetic material from the virus is present. Whatever route you choose, testing should be done as often as is practical and in a randomized manner. Saving these test results into a binder or sharing them within your organization can help calm fears and limit or prevent any future liability.