



Safe Buildings

You most likely do your work within a building. Often, nonprofit organizations work within *old* buildings. The wiring isn't up to today's code and the plumbing doesn't always work the way it should. Your space may have been repurposed, say a church basement now serves as a food bank. You are forced to gerrymander workspaces in ways that may pose safety and health challenges. This resource is designed to help you create a workspace that is safe and healthy for the people working and the people you serve.

Through this module, you will learn how to:

- Identify building-related safety or health concerns that you can fix.
- Identify building-related safety or health concerns that you can't fix but can mitigate against.



**Washington
Food Coalition**

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Overview

There are four main topics for you to know about safe buildings:

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1. Safety Mindset	1
2. Structure	3
3. Cleanliness	8
4. Design	10

At the end of each topic, you'll find a **Discussion Guide**.



This course is accompanied by a **short video**, also available from nonprofitsafetyhero.com.

We recommend that you print this document and have a pen or pencil handy. We've provided exercises where you can reflect on your situation and make plans. The first one is at the bottom of this page.

Important note: *Employees and volunteers are not allowed to work in a building with:*

- Faulty wiring that poses fire and electrical hazards
- Spaces with no access to a restroom or hand-washing
- Structural flaws that are hazardous
- Spaces that lack emergency exit routes

If this describes your space, please seek expert guidance from Labor & Industries Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH).



Describe your workspace. What aspects of your workspace pose safety concerns?

1. Safety Mindset

When we work every day in an old space, we get used to aspects of using that space that may be dangerous. For example, we compensate for a lack of electrical plugs by stretching extension cords around the perimeter of the room. We forget over time that these electrical cords pose tripping hazards and may overburden old wiring. Our goal through this guide is to help you develop a safety mindset that helps you manage the realities of working with the space you have.

Four Actions for You to Take



1
Understand Your Responsibility



2
Fix What You Can



3
Have a Safety Plan on What You Can't Fix



4
Conduct a Regular Review

1. Understand Your Responsibility

As an employer of staff and/or volunteers, you are responsible ethically and legally for people's safety. That means that you must:

- Provide a workplace free from recognized hazards
- Provide and use means to make your workplace safe
- Prohibit employees from entering, or being in, any workplace that is not safe
- Construct your workplace so it is safe
- Prohibit alcohol and narcotics from your workplace
- Establish, supervise, and enforce rules that lead to a safe and healthy work environment that are effective in practice



Which of these requirements is hard for you to follow? Why?
What is one step that you could stake to make it better?

2. Fix What You Can

Use the checklists contained in this guide to review various aspects of your space. Decide what you can fix based on these considerations:

- Your budget
- Agreement with the building owner (if you are a tenant)
- Risk assessment
- Legal requirements

3. Have a Safety Plan on What You Can't Fix

You won't be able to fix everything. How do you manage the elements of your building that may be safety hazards but that you can't fix? Remember, you must ensure that employees and volunteers are not exposed to hazards.

Get a free consultation from the Washington Department of Safety and Health (DOSH) to make a plan. DOSH offers four kinds of consultations (safety, industrial hygiene, ergonomics, risk management) to help organizations be pro-active in getting feedback and support.

For more information or to schedule a consultation, go here: <https://lni.wa.gov/safety-health/preventing-injuries-illnesses/request-consultation/>.

4. Conduct a Regular Review

Make it a regular habit that you review the space for safety and health concerns. At least every year, take these actions:

- Go through the checklists in this guide to determine if anything has changed. Building conditions deteriorate over time.
- Conduct safety trainings to ensure that current staff and volunteers understand how to safely work in your space.
- Review whether any changes warrant an investment by your organization or the owner of the building.
- Schedule a DOSH free consultation to get an outside perspective on the workspace.

How can you adopt a safety mindset to see your space with new eyes?



All employers of staff or volunteers must follow the Safety and Health Core Rules set out in the Washington State legal code. The full list can be found here: <https://www.lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-rules/chapter-pdfs/WAC296-800.pdf>. We have drawn from this list in the checklists on the following pages.

2. Structure

You probably know the structure well. You know where the floor creaks or what outlet doesn't work.

Use the following checklists to check in on your structure to ensure that you are doing everything you can to create a safe space for your people.



Physical Structure

Floors

- Load limits (weight limits) for floors are posted. (These are not always possible to find, especially if you are using an older building. If you don't have copies of the engineering studies or building plans, check with the County to see if they have the information.)
- Ensure floors can support the equipment that moves or has motion.
- Ensure floors are not overloaded by the weight of the pallets of food stored on them.
- Ensure that when moving pallets, the weight of the lifted pallet and the equipment used to move the pallet will not exceed the load limit.
- Floors are safe to walk or roll over (no holes, uneven floorboards, weak spots, damaged boards, etc.)

Roof

- Roof is structurally sound.
- Roof drains properly.
- Roof doesn't leak.

Walls/Ceiling

- Walls are stable.
- Load bearing walls are not stressed.
- Interior wall finish is intact.
- Walls are not moist, containing mold.
- Lead paint has been removed or covered. Without lab testing the paint or material, you wouldn't know. It is best to assume all painted surfaces contain lead unless they have been painted over after 1978 when the use of lead paint was banned.
- Asbestos has been removed or covered. Asbestos can be found in old floor tile, linoleum, in building siding and old pipe insulation. A certified company can go through your facility to identify asbestos. If the material can become airborne easily, remove it or cover it with pink paint to identify the material as asbestos.
- Vents are not blocked and have space to allow airflow. 12 inches is the minimum clearance in front of vent, and 24 inches is the recommended amount.

Stairs

- Railings are secure.
- There are no gaps between treads or risers.
- Stairs are not pulling away from the wall.
- Irregular riser-tread ratios are marked or fixed.
- Stairways are not used as storage area and are clear of clutter.



Electrical

Basic

Make sure you:

- Inspect all electrical equipment your employees use to make sure the equipment is safe. Ensure that all relay boxes, outlets, and switches have covers on them and that there are no loose or exposed wires.
- Make sure all electrical equipment is used only for its approved or listed purpose.
- Make sure electrical equipment used or located in wet or damp locations is designed for such use.
- Make sure electrical equipment that is not marked is not used.
- Identify disconnecting means. All breakers or fuses in electrical panels identify what they power.
- Maintain electrical fittings, boxes, panels, disconnect boxes and outlets in good condition
- Maintain working space around electrical equipment. (2' 6" width around the electrical panel sides; 3' 0" in front of the electrical panel; 6' 6" height in front of an electrical panel.
- Secure electrical equipment to prevent your employees from electrical hazards.
- Make sure electrical equipment is effectively grounded either by being hard wired in or by using a three-pronged plug.
- If an extension cord does not have a three-pronged plug, whatever is plugged into it is not grounded.
- Do not use electrical cords that have had the grounding prong damaged or removed. You may not bypass the grounding with a 3 prong 110 volt plug or 4 prong 240 volt plug.
- Make sure electrical equipment has overcurrent protection.

Faulty wiring can lead to accidents or building fires. Faulty wiring can be experienced in the following ways:

- Dim or flickering lights
 - Power cuts experienced only within your building
 - Sparks from sockets
 - Sizzling sounds when using an electrical device or appliance
 - Burning smells or smoke
 - Electric shocks of any severity
 - Warm or hot switches or plug sockets or extension cords
-



Lighting

You must:

- Provide and maintain adequate lighting for all work activities in your workplace.
- Provide adequate light for employees to see nearby objects that might be potential hazards or to see to operate emergency controls or other equipment if general lighting is not available.
- Guard any lighting fixture below 8 feet in height to prevent being broken if bumped.
- If lighting is in proximity to food preparation or storage, provide shielded bulbs to prevent glass from contaminating food if a bulb breaks.

Lighting Table		
Activity	Minimum acceptable average lighting level in an area: (Foot-candles)	Any one single measurement used to determine the average lighting level* cannot be less than: (Foot-candles)
Indoor task	10	5
Outdoor task	5	2.5
Nontask activities for both indoor and outdoor	3	1.5

What is a foot-candle?

It's a common unit of measurement used to calculate adequate lighting levels.

* Lighting levels must be measured at thirty inches above the floor/working surface at the task.

Consider this example: The lighting of the average office parking lot on a dark, rainy, non-moonlit night, will usually exceed the 1.5 foot-candles. Enough to find your car keys, but probably not enough to read by or use tools effectively.

Systems and Equipment

Heating and Air Conditioning (AC) Systems

- Look for signs of deterioration.
- If your heating or air conditioning system is a boiler, have the system inspected annually.

Water Supply and Drain Systems

- Inspect water supply and waste pipes for rust and leaks.

Facility Safety Equipment

- Check facility safety equipment to make sure it is in proper working order.
- If your facility has a fire suppression system, ensure the system is inspected and maintained as required.
- Ensure fire extinguishers are inspected and easily accessible.

Carbon monoxide can be released by a boiler or carbon burning appliances. <https://www.access-board.gov/ada/guides/chapter-4-accessible-means-of-egress/>. If you have either of these, look out for:

- Headaches
 - Dizziness
 - Nausea and vomiting
 - Tiredness and confusion
 - Stomach pain
 - Difficulty breathing / shortness of breath
-



Escape

Exit Routes

- Provide an adequate number of exit routes. <https://www.access-board.gov/ada/guides/chapter-4-accessible-means-of-egress/>
- Make sure that exit routes are large enough.
- Make sure that exit routes meet their specific design and construction requirements.
- Make sure that each exit route leads outside.
- Provide unobstructed access to exit routes.
- Exit doors must be readily opened from the inside.
- Use side-hinged doors to connect rooms to exit routes.
- Provide outdoor exit routes that meet these requirements.
- Minimize danger to employees while they are using emergency exit routes.
- Mark exits adequately.

Safe Buildings

- Provide adequate lighting for exit routes and signs.
- Maintain the fire retardant properties of paints or other coatings.
- Maintain exit routes during construction and repair.
- Provide doors in freezer or refrigerated rooms that open from the inside.

More about Exit Routes

- The minimum width and height requirements used in workplace safety code are not the same as the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) requirements.
- In retrofitted (older) spaces, Washington law requires two exit routes with a minimum of 28 inches wide and 7 feet 6 inches high:
<https://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=296-800-31005>
- ADA requires 36 inches wide so a wheelchair can pass through:
<https://www.ada-compliance.com/ada-accessible-route>

Alarms

- Install and maintain an appropriate employee alarm system.
- Establish procedures for sounding emergency alarms.
- Practice fire drills and emergency drills.
- Tell employees where the safe area is to evacuate to.
- Test the employee alarm system.





3. Cleanliness

You must provide your employees with a clean, dry, and pest-free workplace. We covered cleanliness as it relates to food bank spaces in the food safety module.

Here is a checklist to support your practice.



Housekeeping

- Keep your workplace clean.
- Sweep and clean your workplace to minimize dust.
- Keep your workplace free of obstacles that interfere with cleaning.
- Control pests in your workplace.
- Make sure floors are maintained in a safe condition.

Drainage

- Keep your workroom floors dry, when practical.
- Provide proper drainage.

Storage Areas

- Store things safely.
- With outdoor storage, control vegetation in your storage areas.

Drinking Water

- Provide safe drinking (potable) water in your workplace.
- Clearly mark the water outlets that are not fit for drinking (non-potable).
- Make sure that systems delivering not-fit-for-drinking (non-potable) water prevent backflow into drinking water systems.

Bathrooms and Washing Facilities

- Provide bathrooms for your employees.
- Provide convenient and clean washing facilities.

Eating Areas and Food Service

- Make sure eating areas are safe and healthy.
- Follow these requirements if you provide food service to your employees.

Garbage and Waste Disposal

- Dispose of garbage and waste safely.
- Remove garbage and waste in a way that does not create a health hazard.
- If using trash compactors or cardboard bailers, make sure that the guarding and controls are functioning and in place.

Lunchrooms and Personal Service Rooms

- Provide a separate lunchroom if employees are exposed to toxic substances if they are allowed to eat and drink on the job site.
- Provide showers when required for employees working with chemicals. Test the shower weekly to ensure that it works.
- Provide change rooms when required.
- Make sure any work clothes you provide are dry.

Environmental Tobacco Smoke in the Office

You must eliminate exposure to environmental tobacco smoke in your office work environment.

- Prohibit tobacco smoke in your office work environment.

4. Design

You make your space your own in order to get the job done. Your options may be limited. You still have some ability to understand how your space is being used to make it safer for the people working there.

There are two considerations, which we have listed below.

1. People Are Working in Safe Spaces

This means they can:

- Hold their bodies in ergonomically safe ways.
- Breathe fresh air.
- Work within a reasonable temperature (not too hot, not too cold).

Take time to observe how people are working. Notice how they are holding their bodies. Notice how they are feeling related to workspace climate.

2. People Are Able To Move Safely

- Pathways are clear of tripping hazards, locked doors, or other barriers.
- Pathways are clearly marked in case of an emergency.

Study how people move around the space. Do they regularly avoid a certain area? Are there traffic jams in other areas?



On the [Nonprofit Safety Hero website](https://www.nonprofitsafetyhero.com), you can learn about Ergonomics. Download the Ergonomics Guide as a reference for your workplace, or take the course and get a certificate in Ergonomics at [nonprofitsafetyhero.com](https://www.nonprofitsafetyhero.com)

What design changes would fix workspaces or pathways within your facility?

