



## Making our buildings safer

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This question usually leads to a practical discussion of what many of the participants have already done at their churches, schools, and/or places of employment. The interesting thing about this question is that the answers can have large degrees of variation from one facility to another. But like all safe environment policies, generalities about site safety can help guide the specific details to be implemented. And when it comes to common rules that applies to just about any facility, probably the best one to start with is...."Take a walk."

Assign a suitably diverse group of people (If you want to be scrupulously official, form a committee.) the task of physically inspecting the buildings and grounds with eyes peeled specifically for any issues that may be used to the detriment of safety. Be sure they make their rounds at various times of day and during various activities to get a better idea of the whole picture. And as they go, have them bounce ideas off each other and take notes as they stroll.

Now admittedly, no regional policy maker is going to know the environment as well as the folks who are there every day, but they do not have to. What they can do though is keep an eye on what everyone is doing and spread the word whenever they hear of a novel approach to a common circumstance. And that's what this article is about. Following below is a listing of some of the better, though not commonly stated, ideas that have cropped up in sessions. So in no particular order, here are some of the things to watch for as you inspect your premises.

- Many facilities have locked bathrooms for which only approved personnel have keys. Be aware if any other programs besides your own have access to the bathrooms, and develop policies regarding who may escort non-keyed people to the bathrooms. Likewise, develop policies that maintain the safety of those inside while also respecting their privacy.
- Make note of rooms without windows. If possible, install windows. If that is not an option, install a means of knowing if the room is occupied. Also, develop policies and procedures regarding the safe use of such rooms. (ie. If children and adults are in the room, the door must be open. Or better yet, if children and adults must be in the same room, they cannot use that one!)



- By most standards, playgrounds cover a relatively large amount of real estate. Sometimes, the far corners can become a hangout for individuals with less than honorable intentions that run the gamut from skipping class to pushing drugs. Identify if these grey zones exist and adjust schedules, patrols, equipment, activities, etc to make these solitary spots areas that are more commonly used.
- Replacing burned out lights in dark corridors is commonly suggested, but don't forget the darkened lights outdoors on your properties. Well-lit grounds are detrimental to illicit activities.
- Everyone tends to be on board with putting windows in closed doors, so let's make sure to use them. Look through the windows of closed doors and see if any portion of the room is effectively blocked from view. If so, develop a method of viewing those mystery spaces so no one can manage to get off by themselves.
- Some buildings have stairwells that go into the basement and up to the roof. Often the doors to these areas are dutifully locked, but the landings in front of the doors can be dark and completely out of the field of view of anyone passing by below (or above). These areas can be caged off or secured by other means.

All of these circumstances require methods to address any shortcomings, here are three items that go a LONG way to addressing your concerns.

1. Mirrors—These handy devices allow you to see around corners from a distance. They are fantastic at wiping out blind spots in rooms and hallways. They are also cheaper than punching windows through walls.
2. Motion light switches—They automatically light dark spaces whenever someone steps into them (like stairwells). Not only are they affordable to buy and install, they save electricity by killing the lights when no one is around.
3. Keys (actually a lack thereof)—Once upon a more trusting time, many parishes and schools gave keys out to anyone with even minor responsibilities. Sadly, it is safer to limit keys to vital personnel. That way, officials know who is using the premises at all times. In a similar vein, alarm codes should be limited and individualized. Many folks do not realize that alarm systems can keep a log of each code entered. It's a handy way of knowing who came in during off hours.
4. Finally, we need to make efforts to be aware of entrances/exits at the time when kids are coming and going. This may involve hall monitors, cameras, or whatever is most efficient, but considering the sheer number of doors involved in some of our buildings, it becomes critical for maintaining a safe space. If it is not done, how would one know who has come onto or left your premises?

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Like all things, it takes effort. But like all good things, the effort is worth it. So the next chance you get. Rustle up some colleagues, and take a walk.