

Balcony Safety

Balconies can be a blessing, providing us with expansive views and a great deal of convenience, but they also bring with them several potential risks.

Taking the necessary precautions for safety is paramount for residents and visitors alike, so it is important for all partners (Housing Corporations, Advisors, Staff, Officers) to work together. The role of this group should focus on the following:

- Identification of common hazards
- Create rules and guidelines or prohibit use of the balcony
- Conduct regular inspections
- Coordinate third party inspections
- Address egress issues with Fire Department and meet the minimum required by code
- Establish House Corporation standards that need to be met to obtain recognition and coverage under the Fraternity's liability insurance policies
- Standardized Housing Agreement and Lease Structure
- Proof of Compliance with IRS not-for-profit requirements (990)
- Third party inspection completed at least on biennially basis

From cracked railings to fall from heights that could result in injury, there is much to be aware of regarding safety protocols for balconies. This resource will assist with threats, prevention, and guidance on how to conduct a risk assessment.

Common Threats and Prevention Strategies

To ensure your space is safe and secure, familiarize yourself with the common threats associated with balconies and take the necessary precautions to minimize these risks.

Structural Failure

Balcony collapses can be incredibly dangerous, resulting in serious injury and even death. Structural failure of a balcony is often the result of a construction issue or inadequate maintenance. It occurs when building codes are not followed during construction, cheap or improper materials are used, or the property is not regularly inspected.

Prevention

1. **Use proper materials and construction techniques:** Building a balcony requires attention to detail and appropriate materials and construction techniques. From properly sized support beams to choosing the right fasteners and adhering to all applicable building codes, there are several important elements to consider when planning and constructing a balcony. Doing so will ensure that your structure is safe and stable, enabling it to stand the test of time.
2. **Have the balcony inspected regularly:** Potentially hazardous structural issues can be identified and addressed swiftly with routine checks, reducing the likelihood of more expensive repairs. With regular inspections, any necessary repairs can be made before the damage becomes severe enough to affect the entire structure significantly.
3. **Maintain the balcony properly:** Regularly clean the balcony to remove debris, mildew, and mold, as well as perform repairs immediately when damage such as cracks or breaks occur. In addition, it is important to be mindful of the weight limit of a balcony, as overcrowding or the addition of heavy objects can put immense strain on the structure.

Falls

Too often, people forget that balconies typically exist at a considerable height, which makes the risk of falling much greater. Injury or even death could result from an unsecured balcony, so it is always important to remember to check for proper safety measures in place before using a balcony area.

Prevention

1. **Install handrails:** Handrails are an invaluable asset for any balcony, providing a secure barrier to reduce the risk of falls. As such, it is important that they are correctly installed and regularly checked to ensure maximum safety. Handrails should be accessible and sturdy, with high-quality materials used in their construction.
2. **Use safety barriers:** Safety barriers like walls or screens are effective safeguards against falls from balconies. Although they may seem unimportant, their proper installation and maintenance should not go overlooked.
3. **Keep the balcony clear:** Keeping your balcony clear of clutter can help significantly reduce the risk of falls. Risks increase when furniture, potted plants, or garden utensils are left unattended, making it harder to navigate a path and spot potential hazards.
4. **Use caution when using the balcony:** It is important to use balconies with caution: do not lean on or put too much weight on railings that are not designed for this purpose and be mindful of your movement when moving around the balcony.
5. **Use non-slip surfaces:** Installing non-slip surfaces on balconies is a smart way to boost safety and reduce the risk of falls. Non-slip mats are one option for increased stability on walking surfaces, as they provide additional grip for shoes. Alternatively, applying a non-slip coating to the balcony can achieve a smoother finish while enhancing the floor's slip resistance.
6. **Follow safety guidelines:** It is necessary to adhere to any safety guidelines the manufacturer or property owner provides. This could include installing handrails or other protective barriers and being extra cautious if using the balcony during inclement weather.

Unsafe Balcony Surfaces

Unsafe balcony surfaces can be dangerous, increasing the risk of falls and accidents. When surfaces are slippery or uneven, it can be easy to lose your footing and take a tumble.

1. **Wet surfaces:** Balconies that are wet can create a dangerously slippery surface. This is especially true if the balcony is made of tiles or concrete, providing little traction when wet.
2. **Loose materials:** Loose materials on balconies can be dangerous. It is important to make sure your balcony is clear of any loose gravel or sand before using it. If you see any loose materials, sweep them up or remove them from the area to keep yourself and others safe.
3. **Uneven surfaces:** Raised or sunken areas on balconies can be difficult to navigate and increase the likelihood of slipping or falling.
4. **Slippery materials:** Slippery surfaces are a leading cause of fatal and non-fatal falls in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov)), more than 800,000 people are hospitalized yearly for fall-related injuries. Balconies made of naturally slippery materials, such as polished stone or metal, may increase the risk of falls.
5. **Worn surfaces:** Worn balconies can create a hazardous situation due to their uneven surfaces. Cracks and breaks increase the risk of falls, as the edges are not even or stable anymore.

Prevention:

1. **Use non-slip materials:** Repairing the balcony after the damage is essential for safety. Cracked surfaces could cause injuries, so any repairs should be done as soon as possible. Minor repairs can often be done at home with some common household items, but more major breaks should be handled by a professional contractor who can ensure the repair is safe and secure.
2. **Repair any damage:** If a balcony's surface becomes damaged with cracks or breaks, it is essential to quickly repair the area for safety. Not only can the damage present a trip hazard, but the openings can also provide an entryway for weather elements to enter and harm the structure's integrity beneath its surface. Make sure to utilize durable materials that match the existing surface to properly protect and patch up any cracks or breaks from weathering over time.

3. **Clean the balcony regularly:** Removing any leaves, branches, or other types of debris helps to ensure that the surface is smooth and even, reducing the chance of injury due to tripping or slipping.
4. **Use caution in wet conditions:** To reduce the risk of danger, it is important to take caution when walking on a wet balcony. This may include wearing non-slip shoes for added grip or using a non-slip rug or mat in areas of frequent traffic where nonslip shoes may not be available.

Crime

Balconies can be a major security concern when accessible to people outside of a building, as it opens the possibility of theft and vandalism. Both inhabitants and property owners must take proper precautions to ensure that balconies are secure and well-maintained to preserve the safety of everyone around them.

Prevention:

1. **Secure the balcony:** To keep unauthorized entries at bay, it is essential to ensure entrances to your balcony are properly secured. Install locks on doors and windows leading to the balcony for an extra layer of security and consider adding barriers or screens for further defense against intruders.
2. **Install security lighting:** Security lighting is critical to protect against intruders. By installing motion-activated lights on balconies, the risk of being seen and detected by family members or neighbors increases, making it more difficult for people to access the unseen area.
3. **Use caution when using the balcony:** It is important to stay safe while using your balcony, so keeping doors and windows leading to it locked is a must. Additionally, never leave valuable items in plain sight from the outside, making them an easy target for burglars.
4. **Keep the balcony clean and clutter-free:** Clutter and dirt can easily become hiding spots for criminals to take advantage of, making it easier for them to carry out their activities unnoticed. By staying on top of the tidiness of your balcony, you are helping keep yourself and your property safe.
5. **Use security cameras:** Security cameras can be a great asset in protecting your balcony or living space. They provide evidence of any activity that may happen, deterring crime and ensuring you feel secure in your home.

Weather

Balconies are often exposed to the elements and can be easily damaged by extreme weather conditions. For example, high winds can destroy a balcony, and heavy snowfall can damage its supporting structure.

Prevention:

1. **Use protective coverings:** Installing awnings on balconies can offer great protection against rain and snow. Not only do they block water, but they also shield the balcony area from strong UV rays, excessive wind, and even dirt or debris. A quality awning provides an additional layer of security against any weather condition – preventing mold, wood rot, erosion, and more.
2. **Install weather stripping:** Weather stripping is an inexpensive and effective way to protect against water damage caused by gaps in windows or doors leading out to a balcony. Weather stripping can create an airtight seal and keep moisture from migrating inside by simply rolling it or pressing it onto the edges of door or window frames. In addition, it also helps with noise and heat insulation, making it a great all-in-one solution for many homeowners.
3. **Use caution in extreme weather:** Extreme weather conditions can present dangers when using the balcony, so caution should always be exercised. Heavy snowfall and strong winds can create hazardous conditions, so it is best to avoid using the balcony while they are occurring.
4. **Repair any damage promptly:** Act quickly if your balcony has been damaged by weather, as leaving it unattended can quickly lead to further damage. Depending on the severity of the issue, you may need to hire a professional for assistance.

Fire

Balconies may be a pleasant outdoor space for relaxation, but it is essential to remember that they can be a major fire hazard when placed too close to ignition sources. Barbecues and smoking materials are common causes of balcony fires, making it important to ensure that balconies are placed a safe distance away from these sources.

Prevention:

1. **Do not use open flames:** Open flames of any kind should always be avoided on balconies. For one thing, they create an obvious fire risk; the smallest spark can quickly spread to nearby combustible material and cause a dangerous blaze. Additionally, windy conditions make it more likely that sparks will fly off and land somewhere else, leading to a greater chance of accidental ignition.
2. **Do not leave appliances unattended:** Unattended appliances on a balcony can be hazardous. They might overheat and start a fire, gathering debris like leaves or other combustible materials due to wind gusts. Operating a grill, heater, or any other appliance outdoors is not recommended, especially without supervision.
3. **Use caution with flammable materials:** Safety should always be a priority when using flammable materials on a balcony, such as fuels and cleaning products. Storing combustible items in an outdoor space increases the risk of fire. It is essential to handle these items cautiously and store them away from heat sources, like open flames and direct sunlight.
4. **Install smoke alarms:** Installing smoke alarms on balconies can be an invaluable asset in a fire. Smoke alarms are designed to monitor air quality, detect smoke or heat, and alert occupants of danger so they can safely evacuate.
5. **Have a fire escape plan:** To protect those living in your home, it is essential to have a fire escape plan for balcony fires. This could include having an emergency exit route and designating a meeting place so that everyone has a safe place to meet if evacuation becomes necessary.

Improper Balcony Maintenance

It is important to ensure the balcony is regularly maintained for safety. Poorly maintained balconies can become structurally weak or even hazardous.

Prevention:

1. **Regularly inspect the balcony:** Cracks and loose railings can be dangerous and should be tended to immediately, making regular inspections essential. Taking a few moments each month will help ensure that any damages are spotted quickly before they become major issues.
2. **Make necessary repairs promptly:** Ignoring signs of failing fixtures, such as roof leaks or windows that need weatherstripping, can quickly cause serious damage to your home. Additionally, some repairs can pose a hazard, like a faulty balcony railing or malfunctioning smoke alarm. Handling any problems as they arise will keep your home well-maintained and save money in the long run.

Clutter

Balconies can quickly become crowded with furniture, plants, and other objects, which can increase the risk of accidents. It is important to keep this space organized and clutter-free.

Prevention:

1. **Designate a storage area:** A specific storage area to store items from the balcony can efficiently avoid clutter. The possibilities for finding creative ways to organize your space are endless, from shelves to labeled bins.
2. **Remove unnecessary items:** Removing items like old chairs, potted plants, and other decor from the balcony can reduce clutter and create a more open aesthetic.

Overcrowding

Balconies are not designed to handle overcrowding, yet more people than their intended capacity will often occupy them. This can be a dangerous situation – not only does it increase the risk of someone falling, but it can also lead to significant structural failure that could end in even more serious consequences.

Prevention:

1. **Follow safety guidelines:** Following safety guidelines is essential to the safe use of balconies. Staff, Volunteers, or chapter leadership may outline specific rules regarding their balconies, such as the maximum number of people allowed on it at once or recommended weight limits on railings.
2. **Monitor the number of people on the balcony:** It is essential to keep a close eye on how many people are standing on the balcony. Overcrowding can lead to potential risks and loss of physical safety, so an attendee must be willing to step in and ask those present to leave if necessary.

Poor Lighting

Balcony safety should not be taken for granted; a lack of sufficient lighting can dangerously increase the likelihood of an accident, especially if the balcony is high. Ensure that you have reliable and adequate light sources around your balcony to avoid any possible slips.

Prevention:

1. **Install adequate lighting:** Having adequate lighting on the balcony is essential for safety. Overhead lights can provide strong, clear coverage of the area, while wall-mounted lights will provide a more subtle illumination which may be preferable for evening purposes.
2. **Use motion-sensing lights:** Motion-sensing lights are a great way to save energy while still providing adequate lighting when spending time on the balcony at night. These lights sense movement and come on automatically, then turn off once you are done with your activity, so you will not have to worry about wasting electricity.
3. **Install night lights:** Installing night lights on a balcony helps to keep the area illuminated with a gentle level of light, making it easier and safer to navigate when the sun goes down. This low-level lighting helps to illuminate stairs and pathways that may not be obvious in darkness, which can be helpful when needing access out onto the balcony at night.

Balcony Enclosures

Balconies enclosed with glass or other materials may be great for views and extra light, however, they, unfortunately, also increase the risk of accidents due to breakage.

Prevention:

1. **Use proper materials and construction techniques:** Building a balcony enclosure requires careful attention to detail and consideration of local building regulations. To ensure the structure is safe and secure, it is essential to use high-quality materials appropriate for the planned conditions and construction techniques that comply with all relevant laws and codes.
2. **Have the enclosure inspected regularly:** Regular inspections are essential for ensuring the safety and longevity of the structure. They can identify issues that could become significant repair jobs if left unaddressed, allowing for proactive maintenance to save expenses in the long run. Such an inspection should be conducted by an experienced professional and typically involves ensuring all components are intact and fastened securely, checking for corrosion or other signs of damage, and assessing the general integrity of the structure.

Near Hazardous Location

Balconies may be located near certain hazards. Power lines, in particular, are a hazard that should be considered before installing a balcony on or near your property. If the balcony is too close to power lines, it can create dangerous obstacles for those using it and pose an increased risk of accidents for residents and visitors alike.

Prevention:

1. **Follow building codes and regulations:** Building codes and regulations exist to keep occupants of new structures safe and secure. Hazardous areas such as electrical lines or gas pipes must be considered for balconies when determining position.
2. **Use caution when using the balcony:** If your balcony is situated near a hazardous area, utilizing it safely should be a priority. Preventive measures such as setting up a protective covering and avoiding it in extreme weather can reduce the risk of injury.

Window Prevention

In addition to balconies, remember to take into consideration risk around windows.

Prevention:

1. **Identify risks where members gather and sleep.** Make sure that bunk beds and lofts are placed away from windows. Put window guards on windows to prevent them from opening too far. Make sure windows and screens are in good repair.

Source: [Balcony Risks Exposed: 12 Threats You Need to Know About – Apartment ABC](#)