

Risk Management Considerations for Church Fitness Centers, Classes and Gymnasium Use

With all the health initiatives in today's world, it is becoming more common for churches to provide in-house fitness centers or offer fitness classes and gym use. While providing these options to members is great, churches must consider the related risks. It is important to take the necessary steps and precautions to keep members safe and reduce liabilities.

Fitness Centers

If your church provides a fitness center for church members, it is important to have a statement urging all participants to be evaluated by a physician before beginning any exercise program. Also, follow these recommendations:

“Membership” Covenant – Create an agreement that includes a waiver or release, a statement regarding health insurance and a consent to emergency medical treatment. Check out this [sample provision \(word\)](#) or [\(PDF\)](#).

Check-In System – Use a system to log or record facility usage, as well as limit use to church members only.

Rules of Conduct – Establish procedures of conduct, signed by members, and keep them posted at the facility. Considerations include: attire, conduct, sanitation, hygiene, food and drink, valuables, and reporting of problems.

Staffing and Supervision – Provide adequate staffing for the fitness center.

Equipment Instructions – Provide instructional placards and/or a staff-provided orientation for each piece of equipment.

Equipment Inspection and Maintenance – Develop a program to perform regular inspection on equipment, as well as an established procedure on removing malfunctioning equipment from service.

No Free Weights – Avoid free-standing weights, as they can be dangerous to use.

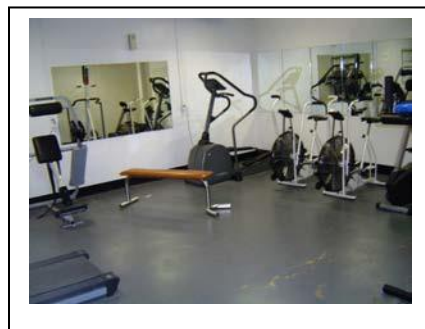
Emergency Procedures – Identify emergency procedures for members, and provide related training for staff. This would include training on responding to emergencies and reporting of injuries.

Facility Procedures – Establish procedures for facility opening and shut-down/lock-up.

Allowing Minors – Establish a minimum age limit, if minors are allowed to use the fitness center. Also, require a parental consent/release form, parental consent to treatment and adult supervision.

Fitness Classes

If your church offers fitness classes to members, again it is important to have a statement urging all participants to be evaluated by a physician before beginning any exercise program. For more risk management, follow these tips:



Instructors – Hire certified instructors only. If using an outside instructor, have a written facility usage agreement with hold harmless language. Also require a certificate of insurance, with the church added as an additional insured.

Regular Inspection – Perform regular inspection of class space and any equipment used.

No Full-Contact Classes – Do not offer gymnastics, martial arts, Taebo, or any other class of this nature.

Equipment Storage – Properly store class equipment, at the conclusion of each session.

Train Instructors – Provide training for instructors in responding to emergency situations, reporting of injuries and facility shut-down and lock-up.

Allowing Minors – Establish a minimum age limit, if minors are allowed to attend classes. Also, require a parental consent/release form, parental consent to treatment and adult supervision.

Gymnasium Use

Once again, if your church offers gymnasium use to members, have a statement urging all participants to be evaluated by a physician before beginning any exercise program. You may want to limit use to organized church activities only, eliminating public pick-up games. Also, consider these risk management tips:

Rules of Conduct – Establish rules of conduct and/or play. Considerations include: footwear, attire and conduct. Distribute these rules to players and post them at the facility.

Church Representative – Designate a church member to be present at each activity. This representative is responsible for ensuring rules of conduct and/or play are followed, deterring injury- or damage-producing incidents, responding to emergency situations, and facility shut-down and lock-up.

Train Church Representatives – Train church members to respond to and report injuries.

Usage Agreement for Outside Groups – If you allow outside groups to use the gym, develop a facility usage agreement with hold harmless language. Also, require a certificate of insurance with the church added as additional insured.

Allowing Minors – Establish a minimum age limit, if minors are allowed to use the gymnasium. Also, require a parental consent/release form, parental consent to treatment and adult supervision.

Organized Sports

Basketball and volleyball are popular sports to play in a gymnasium and even outdoors. It is important to provide safe locations and equipment, as well as take proper precautions, to prevent injuries. Use the following recommendations when playing both basketball and volleyball:

Physical Exams – Participants must consult a doctor for a physical exam, before they are allowed to play competitively. The doctor can help assess if the participant has any special injury risks.

Warm-Up and Stretch – Participants should conduct warm-up drills and stretches before playing.

No Jewelry – Participants should not be allowed to wear any jewelry, including: necklaces, rings and bracelets.

Good Equipment – All equipment should be in good condition and properly fit participants.

First Aid – Make sure First Aid is available at all games and practices.

Hydration – Water should be provided to keep participants adequately hydrated.

Referees – Hire certified referees to officiate all games.

Supervision – Appropriate supervision consists of two adults for every 10 participants.

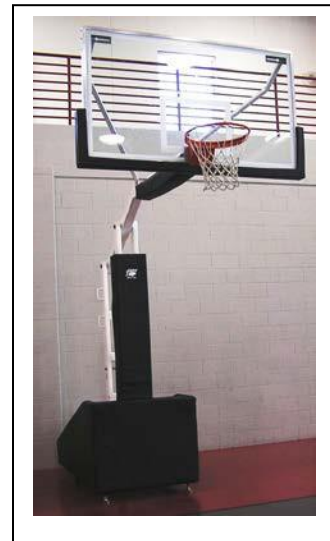
Required Safety Gear – Participants should wear all required safety gear for games and practices. Knee and elbow pads protect against scrapes, bruises and dives on the floor. Mouth guards prevent serious dental damage. Appropriate footwear will provide strong ankle support and good shock absorption.

Eye Protection – If participant wears glasses, the participant should talk to an eye doctor about sports eyewear.

Towels – Towels should be available to wipe up any wet spots on the floor. This helps prevent slip and fall hazards.

A basketball court should have, at minimum, a 10-foot perimeter between sidelines/baselines and the wall. If the distance is less than 10 feet, appropriate padding should cover the wall. Also, if the support behind the backboard is a height of nine feet or less above the court floor, a pad should be placed on the bottom surface of the support, at a distance of two feet from the face of the backboard. All portable basketball goals should be padded from the base to a height of seven feet above the court floor and equipped with signs stating “Danger – Do Not Get on the Rim or Backboard.”

If the volleyball net is supported by wires, the wires should be covered with soft material. If you’re playing outdoors, check the ground for any sharp objects and glass. Also, be sure to wear sun screen if the court is in the sun.



Preventing Slips and Falls

The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that accidental falls account for the most hospital visits each year. If your church provides a fitness center, offers fitness classes or gymnasium use, you’ll want to make sure walking surfaces, stairs and floor surfaces stay properly maintained.

Interior

Providing a fitness center to members will increase the activity inside your church facility. This makes it important to keep the interior floor surfaces clean, dry and clear. Use the following tips to maintain safe walking surfaces in your facility:

Flooring Surfaces – Flooring should be level and in good condition because any variances greater than ¼ of an inch can lead to a trip and fall. Padded flooring, if used around exercise equipment, should be adequately secured, and free from rips and tears.

Wet Surfaces – During workouts, practices or games, floors can become covered in sweat, and sometimes water or other liquids are accidentally spilled. Provide access to towels for users to clean up any spills they may have caused. Train employees and volunteers to identify wet

conditions and to clean up spills immediately. Keep spill clean-up equipment and supplies, such as mops and buckets, available for use. To further alert others of wet, slippery surfaces, warning cones or signs should be placed next to any wet surface conditions.

Entrances and Exits – Due to heavy foot traffic, exits and entrances should receive special attention and should be designed to minimize the slip and fall potential. The best design to effectively remove water, dirt and debris is with a grate system that is recessed in the floor. If this is not possible, floor mats or runners should be used. Carpet remnants should not be used.

Stairways – Stairs and landings should be kept clear and not used for storage. Handrails must be installed, and the stairs should be free from defects and adequately lighted.

Exterior

Offering services such as fitness classes or gym use increases the traffic to and from your church facility. Therefore, it is just as important to keep outside walking surfaces and stairs properly maintained. Use these few quick tips to begin caring for these areas:

Parking Lots and Sidewalks – Surfaces should be in good condition and free of cracks, potholes, debris and slippery material such as rocks, mud and sand. Roof gutter downspouts should not drain onto walking surfaces.

Curbing – Curbs should be six inches high, and curbs leading to entrances and sidewalks should be painted a contrasting color.

Stairways – Stairs should be equipped with proper handrails. Regularly check stairs for potential damage such as cracks, decay or uneven points.

Lighting – Lighting should be provided for walkways, parking lots and stairways. Inspect lighting daily and replace fixtures or bulbs that do not work.

Snow and Ice – Begin snow removal procedures when one inch or more of snow has fallen, or if ice conditions are present. Apply de-icing products to walkways and stairs. Re-route sidewalk traffic if dangerous conditions are creating potential hazards. Make sure to post visible warning signs.

More information and recommendations on safely maintaining your walking surfaces can be found in the following fact sheets:

Slip and Fall Prevention: Snow and Ice Removal

https://www.safechurch.com/Resources/sc/FacilitySafety/slipfall_snow.pdf

Slip and Fall Prevention: Stair Safety

https://www.safechurch.com/Resources/sc/FacilitySafety/slipfall_stairs.pdf

Slip and Fall Prevention: Walking Surfaces

https://www.safechurch.com/Resources/sc/FacilitySafety/slipfall_walk.pdf

Slip and Fall Prevention: Wet Surfaces

https://www.safechurch.com/Resources/sc/FacilitySafety/slipfall_wet.pdf

(05.16.12)

© 2012 GuideOne Center for Risk Management, LLC. All rights reserved.

This material is for information only and is not intended to provide legal or professional advice. You are encouraged to consult with your own attorney or other expert consultants for a professional opinion specific to your situation.