

From Vicious Cycle to Virtuous Circle

Every few months somebody has a new requirement that adds to our Environmental Services workload. More and more, we need to document processes and work histories to prove we're in compliance with regulations.

But are our budgets increasing to reflect greater demands? Just the opposite: I'm being forced to cut costs and still somehow improve quality of care. My Environmental Services staff is working to capacity and I can't afford more people. We all just keep trying to do more with less.

- Rob Millar, Administrator, Summit Place, Central Park Lodge Region 3.

By Jo-Anne Kempe

Jo-Anne Kempe is president of Windmill Software, a leading provider of physical plant management software (PM Worx) for the seniors living industry, as well as training and expert advice. She can be reached at 416-201-7624 (toll-free 1-877-363-9679) or jkempe@windmill-software.com.

Doing More With Less

Sound familiar? The leaders of seniors living communities whom I meet in my work are deeply committed to the comfort and safety of residents. They're trying hard to continuously improve the living environment while staying competitive and meeting financial targets.

So when we discuss implementing a structured preventative maintenance program, they're both excited and daunted by the prospect. Excited because they see an opportunity to turn what's become a vicious cycle into a virtuous circle – saving time, money and hassle. Daunted because with all the competing priorities on their plate and no template or structure to start from, the task seems overwhelming and the payback too far into the future.

Reactive to Proactive

And yet when a major piece of capital equipment breaks down at exactly the wrong time – a heating system in the middle of winter or the air conditioning in July – they have a problem. Besides the negative impact on their reputation for providing quality care, there's a big unexpected cost to explain to the board and cover somehow.

Malfunctions in fire safety systems or medical devices such as resident lifts are an even greater worry. These put the safety of residents and staff at risk, and they can lead to lawsuits or skyrocketing worker's compensation premiums. If communities can't prove they've done the preventative maintenance the manufacturer prescribes, they can be found liable for damages. And that can be very expensive.

The Vicious Cycle

We all know preventative maintenance is important. Few of us, for example, would expect our cars to run smoothly for years without a few oil changes and tune-ups along the way. The benefit of avoiding costly breakdowns – money for tow-trucks, repair and a rental car, not to mention the time and hassle involved – far outweighs the cost of regular maintenance.

For a leader responsible for millions of dollars worth of buildings and equipment as well as the health and safety of residents, the business case for preventative maintenance that reduces cost and risk should be clear. But it's not easy to break out of the self-reinforcing vicious cycle.



Here's how the vicious cycle works: It might start when the recommended practice of regularly vacuuming clothes-dryer vents gets neglected because it's not on anybody's priority list. The dryer catches on fire. It's a small, localized fire and nobody gets hurt, but there's smoke damage to repair, a dryer to replace at a cost of \$5,000 or so and laundry needs to be sent out in the interim.

Maintenance staff are kept busy cleaning up the mess. That creates a backlog of requests for minor repairs. With no prioritization system in place to help staff manage the workload, they juggle requests as best they can – responding to whoever asks most often or is most persuasive. Preventative maintenance is once again put on the back burner.

If time does free up for preventative maintenance, much of it is wasted figuring out where to start and what to do. Equipment manuals and binders of safety regulations are gathered from far-flung corners of the community. Staff try to remember when the fire alarm system was last tested and what exactly was involved. They try to reconcile generic maintenance lists someone put together years ago with the equipment they're using now.

Then an expensive motor seizes up and needs to be replaced. It turns out the worker who had been doing preventative maintenance on the motor didn't know that part of the job was to lubricate the vanes. Money earmarked for energy-saving upgrades of the

heating system has to be diverted to replace a three-year-old motor that should have lasted years. Budgets get cut. The vicious cycle spirals deeper.

In the back of the leader's mind lurks the worry that lack of proper preventative maintenance may be jeopardizing the safety of residents. A generator goes out and critical life-support systems can't function. Smoke detectors fail to give warning of a fire. In one actual case a paraplegic woman was scalded to death in the shower when the water temperature controls malfunctioned. But hypothetical risks are easier to ignore than the irate resident on the telephone, and so important tasks get neglected.

Taking Control

It doesn't have to be this way. With a small up-front investment of time and attention, communities can put a comprehensive preventative maintenance plan in place that turns the vicious cycle into a virtuous circle.

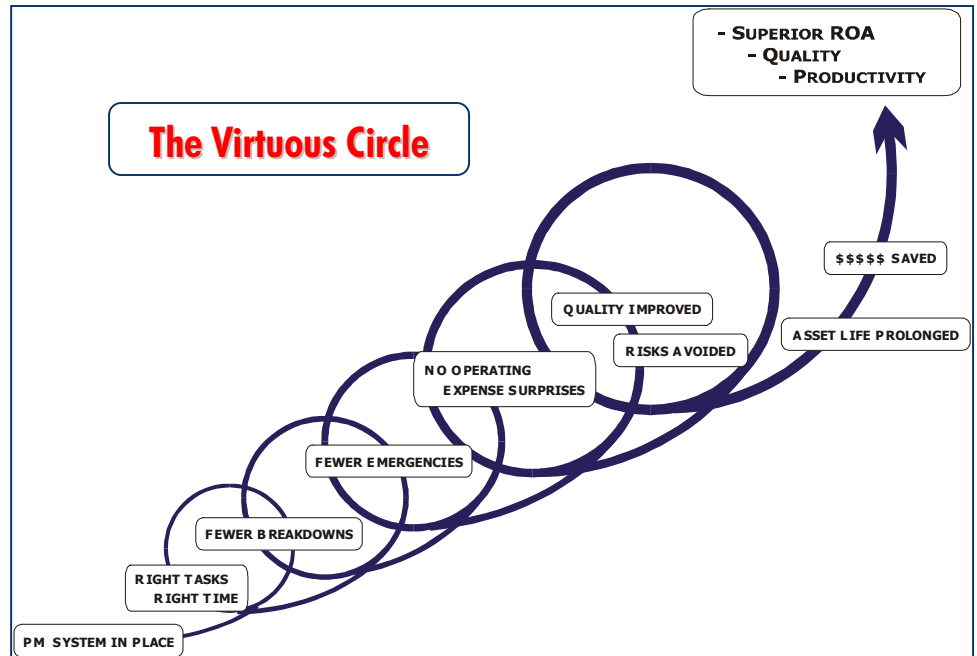
The virtuous circle starts when you clarify preventative maintenance priorities and pull the right information together in one place. With a robust manual (wall calendars) or automated (software-enabled) reminder system to make sure the right tasks are getting done at the right time, there are fewer emergencies, accidents or unexpected breakdowns. The operating budget becomes more stable and predictable – less subject to unplanned and difficult-to-justify spikes. The reputation gained for high quality care and a safe environment helps attract and retain the best staff and keep the community at capacity. Over time, the preventative maintenance program prolongs the useful life of expensive buildings and equipment, delaying the need for capital investment and saving on financing costs.

Five steps to get you started:

1. Brainstorm sources of preventative maintenance.

Obvious sources include:

- Government-legislated requirements for the seniors living industry
- Requirements of accreditation bodies



- Health and safety regulations, fire and building codes
- Recommendations of equipment manufacturers
- Your own quality standards.

2. Document required tasks centrally.

Pull together in one place key information on what needs to be done and when. Capture enough detail to ensure current staff thoroughly understand how to maintain your quality standards and staff you hire in the future will be clear on their accountability.

3. Choose your reminder system.

This can range from automatic pop-up reminders built into software to a manual calendar with recurring tasks noted. You want a system that is easy to update, can handle tasks scheduled for two or three years from now, and reliably prevents items from falling through the cracks.

4. Agree on priorities.

Clarify with all staff – and write down – what type of tasks take precedence over preventative maintenance (e.g. fire-and-flood type emergencies, safety risks, move-ins/outs) and what tasks fall behind preventative maintenance on the priority list (e.g. non-mission-critical corrective repair, minor repair of equipment that has a back-up, “batch” jobs that are more

effectively saved for a contractor to perform all at once).

5. Update regularly.

Be aware of events such as asset purchase, contract renewal, release of new government guidelines that should trigger a review and update of your preventative maintenance template.

Conclusion

There are significant cost reduction and productivity improvement opportunities in a streamlined, proactive approach to physical plant management – opportunities that are largely untapped. Sound preventative maintenance is just one way that leaders can start to take control and provide a better living and working environment at lower cost. The investment will pay for itself over and over again. Why not turn the vicious cycle into a virtuous circle?

Windmill Software has created two checklists and a sample template to help facilities build effective preventative maintenance programs. These reflect best practices in the industry and are available free of charge. Call toll-free 1-877-363-9679 or e-mail: ikempe@windmill-software.com.