

## Mitigating Balcony Risks at Religious Organizations

Balconies offer an elevated viewpoint at religious services. These structures are also frequently used to help choirs project their voices. However, the nature of balconies—namely, their added height—can also pose potential risks. This article outlines some of the primary risks associated with balconies and how your religious organization can mitigate them.

### Potential Risks

Balconies can present their own set of hazards to your religious organization. Here are some key risks related to balconies:

- **Fall risks**—Falling is the most significant risk associated with balconies, often causing major injuries. Such incidents can occur if the railings or barriers on a balcony are too low. Faulty railings or barriers are also a concern. Specifically, these parts may fail or break, resulting in falls. Children attempting to climb a balcony or its railings are also at risk for falling. Other activities, such as maintenance, can also render barriers ineffective if people are working around a balcony via a ladder.
- **Stair hazards**—The stairs leading up to a balcony can easily become dangerous. If snow or water is tracked in from outside, these stairs may become slippery, leading to falls. Furthermore, balcony stairs in older venues may not comply with modern building codes, thus increasing possible hazards. In addition, loose carpeting and poor lighting can heighten the likelihood of slips, trips and falls on balcony stairs.

- **Emergency exit concerns**—During emergencies, blocked balcony exits can prevent timely escapes. Such concerns may also arise if emergency exits are unmarked or poorly lit.

### Risk Mitigation

There are several steps your religious organization can take to reduce the likelihood of injuries or accidents stemming from balconies. Consider the following risk mitigation strategies:

- **Restrict access.** Reduce the number of people who are allowed on balconies during religious services. If possible, restrict access to balconies except during services or other designated times.
- **Check balcony railings.** Ensure balcony railings meet all applicable building codes. A 42-inch railing height is typically required. Yet, be sure to consult local building codes to verify whether this is the required railing height for your community. Railings should also be able to handle at least 200 pounds of force in any direction. Again, this requirement may vary between municipalities. Additionally, balcony railings should not have horizontal rungs, as they may entice children to climb up the railings like a ladder and greatly increase fall risks.
- **Perform inspections.** Balcony railings should be regularly inspected by a qualified contractor. In particular, railings' strength should be tested to ensure they can withstand the required amount of force.

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- **Maintain stairways.** Keep stairways in good condition. This includes providing proper lighting and ensuring stairway railings comply with applicable building codes. Consider placing mats at building entryways to prevent snow and water from being tracked up the stairs.
- **Keep exits accessible.** There must be at least two exits per balcony. This makes escape possible if one exit is obstructed. Exits must be clearly marked and well-lit.
- **Prohibit untrained maintenance.** Employees shouldn't work near balconies unless they have undergone training on fall prevention. Balcony maintenance is generally best left to qualified contractors only.

## Conclusion

Poorly maintained or unprotected balconies can result in serious accidents and injuries. As such, proper risk mitigation strategies are necessary to keep people safe from harm. For more risk management guidance, contact Bitner Henry Insurance Group today.