



# Basic Co-op Maintenance Tips

[Overview](#)

[Simple Tips for Non-Contractors](#)

[Exterior Appearance](#)

[Doors & Windows](#)

[Fire Safety](#)

[Mold/Mildew](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Additional Resources](#)

## OVERVIEW

Co-ops have a responsibility to maintain safe, warm, and attractive living spaces for their members. While the sections below will help the co-op identify issues that already exist and suggest some basic ways to deal with them, the best way to deal with co-op maintenance issues is having a system for preventing and reporting them. A co-op's maintenance program should have at the least:

- A system for members to request maintenance
- A room check-in and check-out system
- A schedule for routine maintenance (changing AC filters, cleaning gutters, etc)
- A schedule for routine building inspections
- Standards for habitability
- A budget for routine maintenance
- A budget for major maintenance (Capital Improvements)
- Defined roles and responsibilities for members regarding maintenance.

## SIMPLE TIPS FOR NON-CONTRACTORS

Any co-op member can help spot problems early. Things to look out for include:

- Swollen or discolored wood or drywall, especially ceilings or around windows
  - These may mean water damage from rain or leaky plumbing
- Electrical breakers need to be flipped on regularly
  - Could be a sign of too many high power appliances (toaster, dryer, heater)
  - Could be a sign that too many rooms are on the same circuit
  - Could be a sign of outdated and unsafe wiring
- Windows or doors don't close properly or have cracks growing out of corners
  - This may mean the foundation is shifting which may need attention
- Small holes in wood or unidentified dust settling under small cracks
  - This may be a sign of wood-destroying insects like termites

- Cracks in tile around tubs, toilets and showers
  - These start small, but when water leaks through them, they get worse quickly
- Dark moldy spots on walls or ceilings, especially high up or in bathrooms
  - This could be mold / mildew and can easily be cleaned with bleach water or commercial cleaners
  - Dangerous “black” mold is rare, but mold is a sign the room needs ventilation
  - More serious growth might require replacing drywall

## EXTERIOR APPEARANCE

Most group housing cooperatives rely on a reputation as being good neighbors and having an accessible community of members. Your members should try to see what the co-op looks like from the street, the tone of your online presence, and interactions your members have with neighbors, community leaders, and local city officials. Making a positive first impression may also be helpful in recruiting members.

The fastest way to turn a community against student co-ops is to fail to maintain the exterior of the co-op properly. Co-op members may do excellent work inside the house, but be sure to pay attention to maintenance issues as well as the appearance of the house and the yard.

To avoid problems in this area, it is advisable to spend two to four hours per week on exterior upkeep and gardening, including picking up trash in the yard, mowing, and landscaping, and making sure that garbage, compost, and recycling do not pile up around the house and yard.

## DOORS & WINDOWS

Here it is important to periodically check for windows that do not open or close properly. Also check for termite and water damage. Cracks in window molding can be evidence of deeper structural problems, as well as raising heating bills in the winter. If gaps are found, be sure to use the appropriate type of caulk around the windows to seal any gaps between the window pane and frame, the frame and the walls of the house, etc.

## FIRE SAFETY

Working smoke detectors should be located in each of the following locations:

- Near every bed
- In every hallway
- In every kitchen
- In every common space
- Near every clothes dryer and heating appliance.



There does not need to be more than one smoke detector in any room, except the main kitchen common space, where there should be at least two. Detectors should be tested on a monthly basis.

Carbon Monoxide detectors should be located in each location where there is an appliance that burns fuel (Kitchens with gas stoves, near furnaces, near gas dryers). Detectors should be tested on a monthly basis.

If your house has a whole-house fire alarm system, it should be inspected at least annually by a qualified inspector. It should also be checked for proper operation at least monthly. Generally, a co-op should be equipped with a whole-house fire alarm system that has a battery backup.

Exit lights and signs should be provided in the co-op. These should be attached to the main house power and have battery backup. They should be tested monthly.

Hallways, corridors, and exit pathways should have 3 feet (1m) wide of clear, unobstructed space to travel through. If your hallway is less than 3 feet (1m) wide, the hallway should be kept entirely unobstructed.

Exit doors should be able to be opened with one single, simple motion. (I.e. no deadbolt/2-part locks.) Consider that they should be able to be opened by a small child in need of escape.

At a minimum, each kitchen should have a working fire extinguisher. It is advisable to contract with a fire safety company for maintenance. A fire safety company will inspect extinguishers annually, make sure they are located in appropriate places, and tag them with important inspection information. Contracts are generally inexpensive, with additional costs for recharging, repairing or replacing extinguishers. Look under "Fire Safety" in the yellow pages.

## MOLD/MILDEW

In the event of problems, here are simple measures to follow:

- Clean the walls: Tri-sodium phosphate (TSP) is a mildew killer and cleaner that can be purchased at hardware and large grocery stores. Clean the walls with TSP, following instructions. All of the mildew must be gone for the next step to work!
- Repaint the walls: There is a paint additive called CPF, which can be added at the paint store or mixed in just before application, which will kill mildew and retard its growth for a couple of years. There are also commercial products like Killz or Gripper that kill or prevent mildew.
- Exhaust Fan: Regular use of exhaust fans in bathrooms that have them (and installation of fans where they are lacking) can help prevent mildew problems from occurring in the

first place. Some fans can vent 24/7 at low power in high humidity areas, and then at higher power when switched on.

- Drainage: Hair traps in bathrooms and food traps in kitchen sinks are a preventive measure that help keep pipes functioning properly.
- Floor: Check periodically for water damage. Water damage is most often identified visually by discoloration. Significant water damage can be identified by touch (a spongy feel or flexing tiles). When necessary, hire a contractor to handle major issues, such as rotting floorboards, damaged joists, or floor re-tiling.

## MISCELLANEOUS

- Avoid the pile of up junk and weeds around the house, as this can lead to infestation problems.
- Inspect on a regular basis (monthly?) to make sure that handrails are secure.
- Check periodically for wall cracks. Often all that is required is a patching compound and repainting.
- Light fixtures that need electrical repair should be identified and fixed on a regular basis (monthly)?
- Steam cleaning the carpet once a year can do wonders.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Madison Community Co-op's Maintenance Coordinator Handbook](#)  
[Improving Energy Efficiency in Historic Buildings](#)