

Property Management Promotes ‘Healthy Building Syndrome’

Promoting ‘Healthy Building Syndrome’ (HBS) - the opposite of Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) - is the unique focus of several property development, management, maintenance and consulting firms in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. Richard Cohen, founder of Potomac, MD-based developer, Willco Companies, Jason Goldblatt, Executive Vice President of Willco Companies and its affiliate, property management firm, Axent Realty Group (Potomac, MD), and Bobby Cohen, Principal of building and indoor environment consultants, PenguinCare (Upper Marlboro, MD), all believe that making tenant environments healthier is a trend that will help shape and transform property management.

The premise is simple: Since we spend 90% of our time indoors and much of it at the office or workplace, improving the indoor environment there will help ensure healthier tenants, higher attendance, more productivity, lower insurance costs, greater tenant retention, and other notable benefits (see also sidebar, “Data Shows: Promoting ‘Healthy Building Syndrome’ is Right for People, Business”).

While this may be easier when buildings are constructed ‘healthy’ from the ground up, for example, using Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) guidelines, Axent Realty Group, which handles property management at 7811 Montrose Road, Potomac, MD, is applying HBS principles and practices as a pilot program at the five-story, 101,000 square foot Class A suburban office and retail complex built in 1985.

“We care about the health and well-being of our tenants, and decided we wanted to make the indoor environment of our tenant buildings as healthy as possible,” said Goldblatt, who runs day-to-day operations of Axent. “We strive to be cutting edge, so when we saw the development and construction industry going this way with LEED, we said, ‘why not the management industry?’”

Goldblatt and his boss, Richard Cohen, began the journey toward better building health after meeting with PenguinCare’s founder Bobby Cohen (no relation) and its environmental health specialist, Marion Stecklow, Director of Environmental Health and Safety. (The PenguinCare name was inspired by the way penguins care for their young; a model of the way buildings should be cared for, according to the company.)

“PenguinCare did an internal audit - of tenant spaces, common areas, restrooms - performed environmental testing, and then reported their conclusions,” said Goldblatt. “They helped expand our paradigm of property management to embrace the total health of the building.”

PenguinCare performed the initial roof-to-ground floor walk-through of 7811 Montrose like a medical diagnostician performing a complete physical.

The examination included, among other things:

- Looking for roof or other moisture intrusions;

- General air intake, ventilation and IAQ issues;
- HVAC systems and filtration;
- Mold detection;
- Dust level assessments;
- Green cleaning products and principles;
- Restroom sanitation;
- MSDS compliance;
- OSHA Blood borne Pathogen and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) compliance;
- Staff training practices;
- Noise (acoustics);
- Lighting;
- Flooring;
- Occupant density;
- Water quality;
- Waste disposal;
- Recycling;
- Presence of first aid kits, wall-mounted defibrillators;
- Flu pandemic and other contingency plans;
- Storage and supply rooms;
- Thermal comfort; and,
- Privacy, security.

“Unlike an OSHA or regulatory audit, this level of detail and scrutiny is designed to help property management be proactive to help ensure building health,” said Stecklow. “We are like a personal physician practicing preventive medicine in each facility we work with, and of course, we offer guidance and prescriptions as needed.”

Stecklow provided Goldblatt and Ron Temple, Senior Property Manager for Axent, and the manager of 7811 Montrose, a building 'health assessment' and actionable recommendations after the initial head-to-toe "checkup".

"Based on PenguinCare recommendations, we have initially introduced hand sanitizing stations in the lobby and tenant areas," said Goldblatt. "We also decided we wanted to make the restroom as healthy an environment as possible. To help people avoid touching potentially infected surfaces - flushers, faucets, doorknobs - we switched to hands-free toilets, urinals, and sinks. There is even an automated system mounted above restroom door handles that sprays and disinfects the door handle at regular intervals; the surface also dries almost instantly and the sanitizing technology has a residual effect. This program minimizes human contact with potentially contagious surfaces. It will help prevent the common cold, flu and other infections passed by touch."

"We will also be cleaning with green products and processes going forward with an emphasis on reducing cross contamination and infection - cleaning for health not just appearances," he added.

"Special procedures will help ensure capturing the maximum dust and dirt, bacteria and contaminants, to reduce the chance of causing or contributing to allergic responses or other sensitivities."

According to Temple: "We have worked collaboratively with our janitorial companies and line custodial workers to enhance cleaning processes. PenguinCare has contributed a lot. For example, they met with our cleaning service provider to brainstorm and synergize joint development of green maintenance and product purchasing protocols."

In the Willco/Axent program, Healthy Building Syndrome (HBS) consciousness extends even to the unseen quality of the indoor air and water. "Whatever we can do to minimize any type of bacteria or microbes passing through our HVAC, we're doing it," said Temple. "We have stringent requirements for filter selection and changing frequency. Keeping water and wet surfaces clean is a priority; we conduct regular Legionnaire's and other testing. PenguinCare provided ideas and answers that were invaluable."

Bobby Cohen, PenguinCare's principal, explains the length to which Willco/Axent has gone to help ensure a healthy environment for workers: "Richard Cohen, Willco's President, explained to me recently that a key staffer had cancer and was returning to work, and asked us for recommendations to help ensure the environment was healthy."

For this type of expert input, technical and field support, PenguinCare taps the expertise of its Science Advisory Board including, in addition to Marion Stecklow, MT, CHCM; Dr. Tee Lamont Guidotti, MD, MPH, Professor of Occupational and Environmental Medicine at The George Washington University; Dr. Howard M. Sandler, MD, Sandler Occupational Medicine Associates, Inc. (SOMA), Gaithersburg, MD, graduate of the University of Maryland, School of

Medicine; and Dr. Sheldon H. Rabinovitz, PhD, CIH, Toxicologist, former EPA advisor and NIOSH scientist.

This is coupled with a tenant education and communication program to highlight the importance of hand washing, and the implementation of measures that will make the environment healthier.

Beyond that, a quarterly monitoring program, commissioned by Axent and performed by PenguinCare, helps ensure the building's health is maintained at a high level, and that service providers and vendors - distributors, contractors, engineers - are continuing to work in harmony with HBS principles. PenguinCare even has a certification program for cleaning contractors to qualify and maintain their cleaning for health proficiency.

The result? It's working. "Feedback from the program has been excellent," said Stecklow. "We will be tracking the data over time to validate what we are seeing anecdotally."

Goldblatt adds: "I foresee us implementing this throughout our entire commercial portfolio, in excess of 5 million sq. ft., over the next several years. Even though there are some incremental costs, especially at startup - education costs, adaptation costs - we want to have our tenants and employees feel safe, secure, and comforted that they are working in a healthy environment. The ultimate goal is healthier occupants and tenants. We believe that goes hand-in-hand with employee and tenant retention."

SIDEBAR

Healthy Building Syndrome – Walking the Talk

Willco and Axent have commissioned consulting, training, product/process analysis and recommendation, and on-call support, as an integral part of their healthy building plan and process. Initial and follow-up audits, and monitoring, by PenguinCare environmental health experts and scientists enable tracking management / work processes, environmental measurements, and, optimally, quantitative and qualitative outcomes (e.g., fewer work days lost, lower insurance costs, better productivity, enhanced morale, etc.) for benchmarking and demonstrating improvements.

SIDEBAR

Healthy Building Syndrome – Goals

- Minimize the threat to the health and comfort of the building's occupants.
- Communicate awareness of environmental and health issues to occupants and take steps to correct those issues.
- Maintain an environment that is hygienic, healthy and safe.
- Protect and sustain the value of client and tenant properties.

SIDEBAR

Data Shows: Promoting 'Healthy Building Syndrome' is Right for People, Business

According to a 2002 report from the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE):

- "...nationwide improvements in health and productivity [are] potentially attainable by providing better indoor environmental quality (IEQ) in U.S. buildings."
- "In a survey of 100 U.S. offices, 23% of office workers (64 million workers) frequently experienced two or more Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) symptoms at work. The estimated productivity reduction caused by SBS symptoms in the office worker population was 2%, with an annual cost of \$60 billion. A 20% to 50% reduction in these symptoms, considered feasible and practical, would bring annual economic benefits of \$10 billion to \$30 billion."
- "...studies have found that the prevalence of respiratory symptoms associated with asthma are increased by 20% to 100% among occupants of [facilities] with moisture problems, implying that elimination of these moisture problems would diminish symptoms by 17% to 50% in these occupants..."
- "Given the \$15 billion annual cost of allergies and asthma, the potential economic gains [from improving IAQ] are \$1 billion to \$4 billion."
- "Eight studies reported statistically significant 23% to 76% reductions in [illnesses such as influenza and common colds] among building occupants with higher ventilation rates, reduced space sharing, reduced occupant density...[etc.]... One study found a 35% reduction in short-term absence ... in buildings with higher ventilation rates ... Given the \$70 billion annual cost of [these types of illnesses], potential productivity gains were \$6 billion to \$14 billion."