

**MPM 20**  
**Safe & Effective:**  
**Winning Strategies for**  
**Field Workers**

Monday, April 23, 2007

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# Why This Session?

The Weatherization and Home Performance business has been a fairly safe business for decades. There have been few documented cases of worker or customer/client injury, illness or death due to our programs (at least that I am aware of).

I found this amazing because, having been involved in all aspects of weatherization, including all jobs in the field, program recipient, and program management, I've seen many opportunities for scary and bad things to happen to houses and people.

To find out if the Home Performance business is just lucky... or super organized and prepared... or a ticking time bomb... and in preparation for this session, a survey was sent to 60 weatherization professionals.

40 people from 40 agencies/companies responded.

# Survey Response Summary

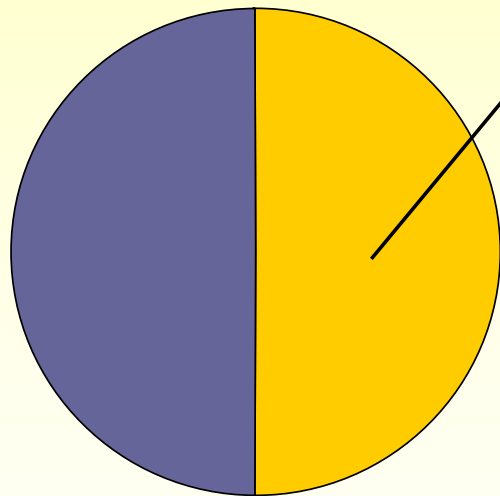
- 75% of those who responded know about some or all of the health and safety procedures for their companies/agencies.
- The other 25% either don't have H & S procedures, or the worker is unaware of them.
- 50% of those who responded claim their companies/agencies don't have procedures to help them deal with "tricky" situations in homes, but they have developed their own.
- The "tricky" situations fell into three groups: unsafe conditions, unhealthy conditions, situations where coping skills were needed.

# What Could Happen?

Being prepared supports weatherization workers and our customers/clients in these ways, and more:

- We stay healthy and alive.
- We stay safe and aware.
- We avoid lawsuits.
- Work production stays high.
- Everyone acts like a partner because everyone feels good.

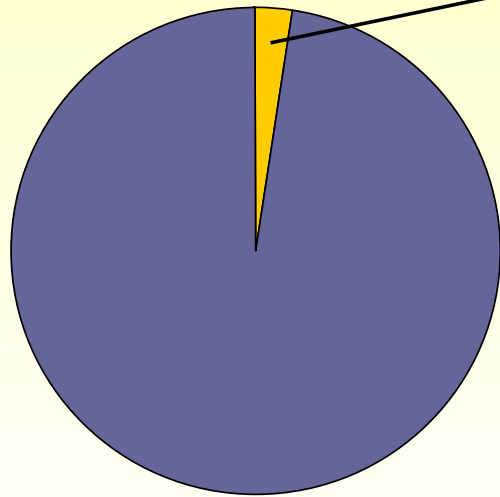
Q: Are there any weatherization materials that your company/agency avoids using? If so, which ones and why?



■ Yes ■ No

- Vermiculite due to the perception it contains asbestos.
- Rockwool because it is too irritating.
- New windows because we're told they are not cost effective.
- Window film because we are afraid people won't like it and we will have "go backs".
- Blown fiberglass and I don't know why.

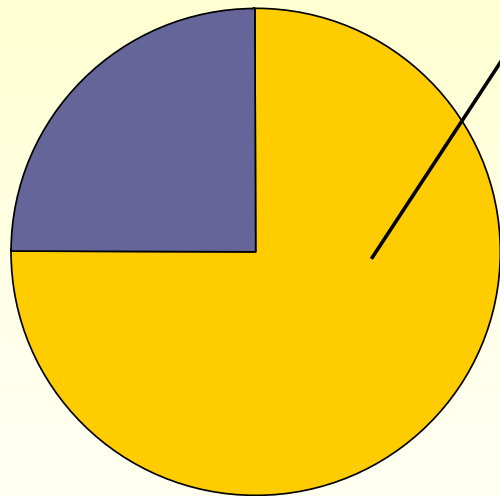
Q: Are there any materials YOU avoid using despite your company/agency policies?



■ Yes ■ No

■ Vent chutes because installation can cause ceiling damage.

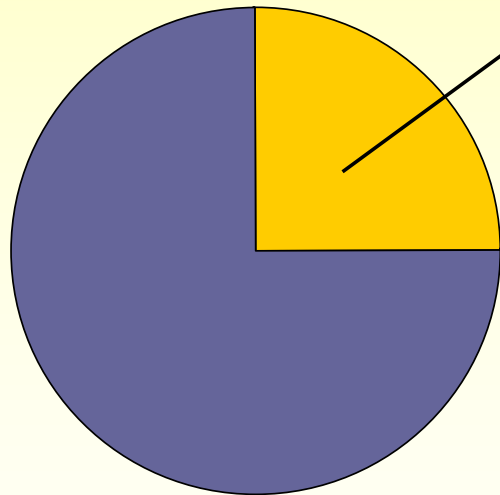
Q: Are there any measures your company/agency avoids doing for health or/and safety reasons? If so, which ones and why?



■ Yes ■ No

- Vents on very steep, high roofs due to high risk for falls. Our safety comes first.
- Asbestos removal.
- Insulating ducts covered with asbestos.
- Blowing over vermiculite due to possible presence of asbestos.
- No air sealing done in homes with unvented gas heaters.
- No air sealing homes with mold unless we, or others, can correct the problem causing the mold.
- No work in areas that may have lead-based paint.
- We don't climb ladders higher than one story.

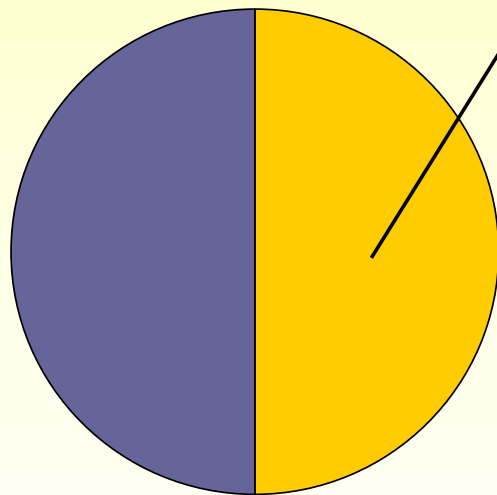
Q: Are there any measures YOU avoid doing despite your company/agency policies?



■ Yes ■ No

- Pipe insulation on water heater pipes in warm areas.
- Insulation on old water heaters because the wrap will make them rust faster and then we will have to replace the water heater.

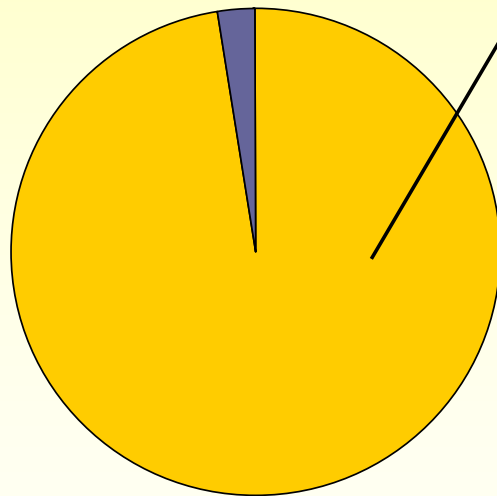
Q: Does your company/agency have any policies or procedures regarding how to handle tricky situations you might encounter in a client/customer home? If so, and if willing, please send these procedures, policies or sample letters to me. (note: no one sent sample procedures to me).



■ Yes ■ No

- Nothing actually in writing, but we use common sense procedures when dealing with roaches, pet droppings, clutter, fleas. We normally give the client 30 days to correct these situations before going back.
- We ask clients to put dogs outside, chained.
- We use Tyvek coveralls, breathing equipment, booties and latex gloves.
- We ask the client to put away religious or racially offensive displays while we are in the house.
- Overt racists are scratched from our list.
- We ask the client to remove unhealthy conditions like animal litter.
- If the client has physical or mental problems, we suggest they take the day away to visit friends or relatives when the crew is scheduled to work.
- Trust your intuition – if you don't feel safe, leave.

Q: Do YOU have any personal techniques for handling sticky situations, in addition to your company/agency policies?



■ Yes ■ No

- Contact our Director immediately.
- ALWAYS act in a professional and business like manner.
- Treat my clients and customers the way I'd want to be treated if I was in their position.
- Keep my mouth shut, get the job done (right) and go home.
- If the customer is not happy with who is working at their home, we send another worker to finish.
- I assure the client that our crews are trustworthy, long time employees and they need not worry about strangers coming into their home.
- I let them know we have been this utility's sole contractor for over 20 years.

## **Q: What was the toughest situation you encountered in the field and how did you deal with it?**

- Bubba and the basement marijuana plantation – I kindly excused myself and never went back.
- The 84 year old love-starved sergeant with a gun – I called the cops.
- The enraged drunk – I gently said good-bye and left.
- The unemployed cop with an itchy trigger finger – I tread lightly and left as soon as I could.
- The house with a flea infestation – I stripped my clothes off in the garage before going into my own house.
- The attic full of bats – We played loud music and used bright lights and went ahead and insulated.
- A water pipe burst – We had to pay the customer off.
- We were charged with sexual harassment because the Educator asked the customer if she had a water bed – I explained to the customer that he asked that question because water bed heaters can use a lot of electricity and that he wasn't hitting on her.
- Excessive clutter and furniture to work around – We move it.

# More tough situations...

- Uneven framing – out of square housing members – We took our time to fit our materials.
- Kiddie porn purveyor – We told the Police and didn't return to complete the job. We don't know if the cops responded.
- Tight spaces under trailers or crawlspaces with sewer leaks – We make sure there are no plumbing leaks prior to sending crews in. We also use Tyvek suits and have plenty of workers to use as 'go-fers' for materials.
- Filthy homes – We try to ignore the filth as much as possible. If the filth is too bad, we tell the customer we can't do the work until they clean up the area where we have to work.
- Urine on the floor that I slipped in and fell into – I ignored it until I got home.
- Mentally challenged older man who tried to kiss me – I pulled away, said NO and left as soon as I could.
- I was held up and my phone, wallet and camera were stolen.
- A mold problem so large that I had trouble breathing – I left as soon as I could and sent them some pamphlets about mold dangers when I got back to my office.
- Roaches fell into my hair and shirt – I stripped as soon as I got home and had to spray.
- Needles fell out of the ceiling tile I moved and I was afraid they pricked me.

# A Related Survey

In 2005, a similar survey was sent to 24 weatherization professionals.

The results of the survey found that field workers wanted help concerning how to deal with certain circumstances surrounding home visits, particularly regarding health, safety and coping skills.

**PPL/DCED Weatherization  
Conference  
April 19-21, 2005  
Customer/Client  
Interactions**

A. Tamasin Sterner  
Pure Energy

# Session Objectives

- To share thoughts about when to stay and when to walk away.
- To share ideas that may improve our success in customer/client homes.
- To discuss ways of interacting and communicating that can help us be more effective.

The questions Tamasin asked the attendees were:

- What specific techniques do you use to help you communicate with customers/clients?
- How do you influence and inspire your customers/clients to make the changes in their homes and lives so that they can save energy?
- When there are unhealthy or unsafe conditions in the home what do you do to build up your tolerances to these conditions?
- How do you take care of yourself so you can be fully present with customers so you can do your job?

# Field Worker Answers

The answers fell into three categories:

1. Strategies for dealing with unsafe conditions
2. Strategies for dealing with unhealthy conditions
3. Coping/partnering skills

# Strategies for dealing with unsafe conditions

- Ask the customer/client to restrain animals for their protection as well as for the worker's protection.
- Carry mace and let the customer know you have it for the animals.
- Trust your intuition. Keep your eyes open and stay aware.
- Let a co-worker know where you are and ask them to call in a half hour so you have an excuse to leave if necessary.
- Work as a team on site.
- Require a person of minimum age to be present.
- Wear appropriate footwear and clothing.
- Contact Child Protective Services or the Board of Health or other social agencies when you suspect risk. These calls are anonymous. (All who said they have done this said there was no backlash for reporting suspected abuse or other conditions).

# Strategies for dealing with unhealthy/unsanitary conditions

- Send registered letters asking the customer/client to clean up (or whatever) by a certain date or the work will not continue.
- Use flea spray from the knees down.
- Explain to the customer/client, in writing, why the work was stopped.
- Time your work for the best season, such as when bees or fleas are dormant.
- Take photos, with permission, to document existing conditions.
- Have separate work clothing and leave it outside.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Explain to the customer/client that clean = efficient = savings.
- The first person to visit the home can record conditions and situations so the following workers know what to expect and how to prepare.
- Involve the landlord so he might fix the problem so work can continue.
- Do as much as you can outdoors where the air may be fresher.

# Coping/Partnering Skills

- Have a good sense of humor.
- Don't get emotionally involved with the situation or the outcome of your visit.
- Act, don't react.
- Ask the customer what they want from your visit so there are no surprises.
- Apply cologne or Vicks under your nose to mask house odors.
- Stay on topic but be willing to listen, listen, listen.
- Connect with the customer/client on her terms.
- Share your feelings and thoughts about your work with someone safe.
- Be aware that clients understand the system, especially Crisis, and keep working anyway.
- Be respectful. You don't have to like the person or situation, but you can still be nice.
- Occupy children with activities like coloring books.

# More Coping/Partnering Skills

- Involve the customer/client in the installation/demonstration.
- Act as if you are comfortable, even if you are not, out of respect for the client.
- Do the best you can.
- Do your work efficiently so you can get out quickly.
- Be glad you have a supportive boss.
- Communicate with other programs. Know what is available to help people so you don't have to try to fix everything. Frequently, the customer already has a case worker assigned who can help you understand the situation.
- Be sure to explain what you want to do and why.
- Explain the benefits of change to the customer/client.
- Tie your work to family safety.

# How Not to Get Sick

- Diseases are transmitted via bacteria and viruses. Keep yourself clean. Don't put your hands in your mouth during or after work.
- Be careful around contaminants such as asbestos, fiberglass, mold, lead, uncured foam, mouse droppings, mercury and sewage.
- “Above all, an agency needs to know when to walk away. As building professionals, auditors and field technicians should never encourage or allow a client [*or field worker, Tamasin's edit*] to waive health and safety in exchange for an energy conservation measure.” Bill Van der Meer, Weatherization Training Center

# Summary

- Be informed.
- Ask for your company/agency procedures. If the health and safety chapters need to be updated, propose an update plan.
- Take care of yourself.

# Useful Resources

- Material manufacturer website. Look for the product specifications, installation guidelines and the MSDS for the product you are using.
- [www.waptac.org](http://www.waptac.org)
- [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)
- [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- [www.cdc.gov/niosh](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh)
- [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov)
- [www.pct.edu/wtc](http://www.pct.edu/wtc)