



All of us have millions of dollars invested in our facilities and in furnishings, but how involved are we in the day to day, week to week, month to month, and year to year assessment and maintenance of our facilities and furnishings? Whether we outsource all maintenance, run all maintenance through our physical plant department, or have a Residence Life maintenance staff, we still have the overall responsibility to our university, our state, and our residents to ensure we have a program of maintenance that is more than entering a work request when something is broken.

At the University of Southern Indiana we have taken an aggressive approach to managing and maintaining our facilities and furnishings by partnering with Physical Plant to go beyond the 'work-order-when-it's-broke' approach to maintenance.

We are a relatively young university, evolving from a commuter branch of Indiana State University in the 1980s to one of the largest growing universities in the state and nation, now housing nearly one-third of our student population. Our fall student enrollment is 10,050 students, and our fall 2004 resident population is just under 3,000.

Residence Life facilities currently comprise four residence halls with a total of 236 suites, four on-campus apartment communities with 43 apartment buildings and 578 apartments, and an off-campus community with 15 apartment buildings and 120 apartments. Our facilities total 934 apartments and suites with spaces for 3,200 residents for fall 2004. This is a huge investment for the university and the state of Indiana in less than 20 years of Residence Life growth; it is imperative that we protect and maintain that investment.

Since the inception of Residence Life at our university, we have had an annual program of summer rehabilitation (REHAB) for our facilities. Each apartment and suite is thoroughly cleaned and painted, and each major subsystem is reviewed by an electrical, plumbing, and general maintenance technician. But still we were in a reactive and not proactive mode of operation.

Director of Residence Life Julie Payne and Director of Facilities Operations and Planning Steve Helfrich, with the support of Robert Parrent, vice president for student affairs, and Robert Ruble, vice president for business affairs, teamed up to make maintaining Residence Life facilities a proactive effort for the University of Southern Indiana.

When I came on board as the manager of housing operations in the summer of 2002, the current summer REHAB program was well under way. The concept of the program at that time was a REHAB maintenance team led by supervisor Larry Shelton and consisting of cleaners, painters, and technicians, along with an inspection team from Residence Life of two area coordinators who would inspect and evaluate each

To Maintain or Not to Maintain:

A Common Sense Approach
to Facilities Management

by Gregory A. Wagoner

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apartment as it was completed by the REHAB team. Once an apartment was accepted back by Residence Life, the Residence Life central office staff would be notified that that particular apartment was ready for fall occupancy.

Being the new kid on the block, my job at that time was to observe and take notes. I was allowed, by the residence life director, freedom from other demands to spend as much time as I needed learning and digesting the whole operation. For me that meant getting a little dirty—I love the hands-on approach. Our two area coordinators took me around to show me what their role was in the program, and I made sure to let them know there would not be any changes made for this cycle. To try to implement any change once the program had begun would have only spelled disaster for all involved.



Ruston Hall is completed this year and opened Fall 2004

I met with the supervisors from Physical Plant, but only to introduce myself. Then I went out to observe what the work crews were doing. The crews were made up of summer student workers under the supervision of a Physical Plant lead person. Now, this is more like it—painting, hammering and nailing, cleaning, HVAC overhaul, free up that disposer—all those little hands-on items that make a facilities person happy.

What better way to learn about your facilities than to look at 870 apartments and suites?

This gave me the perfect opportunity to check quality control and find out first hand if everyone involved fully understood the goals of the program. Not surprisingly, most student workers did not know what REHAB was all about; they were only concerned with getting a paycheck. **Note Number One: “How do we get the troops motivated and have them care about the quality of their work?”**

We have our residents fill out an apartment inventory and condition form when they check out of Residence Life for the summer. So I grabbed a handful of the completed forms and continued my tour of facilities, going into an apartment and reading all four residents’ evaluations of that apartment and any comments they made. It was a very interesting exercise.

“Furniture scratched up. Cushion covers with burns, holes, and split seams. Disposer has not worked since we moved in.



Campus apartments - four communities

Toilet is clogged—no one fixed it, so we just used the other bathroom. The leg came off the chair and we didn’t want to bother anyone so we left it. We are not sure how the hole in the wall got there; it happened when we were gone for the weekend.” **Note Number Two: “Check into damage billing process.”**

Okay, you get the idea, but my point is there is a lot of information on these forms and we need to do something with it. **Note Number Three: “Find out what we do with apartment condition forms.”**

This information has to have more uses than just damage billing, but our thought process at the time was that the information was not needed, because each apartment would have the REHAB crew in it at some time and anything that might be on the check-out apartment condition form would surely be addressed. Maybe, but why not be sure that it gets addressed and have a copy in the apartment when the crews arrive—they could look at it and make sure they took care of all items on the form. **Note Number Four: “Make the apartment checkout form a two-part form, one for Residence Life and one for the REHAB crew.”**

We compiled a spreadsheet with all the raw data, minus the individual comments, to see what the number one complaint was. Want to guess? Furniture condition. Yes, it seems our residents think the furniture in their apartments “was picked up at a yard sale” (*actual comment*).

Time for a powwow with the REHAB supervisor to find out what is done to furniture during REHAB. Answer—nothing. It stays just like it is until it gets so bad it has to be replaced.

It was now time to go see the boss. The Director of Residence Life had been watching my progress all along, meeting with me to find out what I had learned, listening, and guiding me as I put together all the pieces to this puzzle. Generally answering each of my questions with something like “what do you want to do about it?” and “put together a proposal for me.” (*I have since learned to just go ahead and put together the proposal.*)

I could go into great detail about the furniture proposal, but that would be another article. The bottom line is we developed a furniture REHAB program to complement and

supplement our furniture replacement program. We send the hardwood frames out for sanding and refinishing and order replacement covers for the seat and back cushions—the result is furniture that looks nearly new for about half the cost of replacement. In fact, most people think it is new furniture when they walk into the apartment. What I do want to stress is that this effort was a **team effort** with Residence Life, Physical Plant, and Purchasing departments all working together with the same goal in mind of providing the best facilities and furnishings possible to our residents.

Do you ever get the idea that different departments are sometimes at odds with each other? That may be no surprise;

after all, each department is in competition with each other for resources, whether for funding or human resources. We all feel our ideas and projects are the most important on the table and need to be addressed first. So what do you do about that?

We set a standing monthly meeting with Physical Plant to sit down and discuss any housing/ maintenance issues that arose during the month, go over any projects so we all could be updated at the same time, forward-plan our housing consolidation to turn over empty apartments to Physical Plant before the summer REHAB program began, look at our deferred maintenance and long-range development plans on a regular schedule, and most importantly—we do all of this

together.

Residence Life developed a schedule for this year's REHAB program that allowed us to work hand in hand with Physical Plant and REHAB crews, viewing the program as a team effort with Residence Life being a part of the team and not just a customer of Physical Plant.

We attended the first day orientation session for the summer workers and impressed on each person the goals of REHAB and the contribution each person makes toward this effort. During the course of the program I made sure I got around to every crew and had a chance to talk with them more than just casually. *The result was that we found people with pride in their work and the outcome was a quality product.*

So now we have all our apartments and suites ready for the fall onslaught of incoming residents. What else can we do to be more proactive with facilities and maintenance?

How about taking a look at what you can do for yourself? "What the heck are you talking about?" you may ask.

Simple, first we wrote a "Resident's Guide to Self-Help Maintenance." Yes, we are going to teach our residents how to do some things for themselves. And, if they do need a work request we are going to have their resident assistant or area coordinator personally look at the problem to see what needs to be done and write up the work request if needed. The folks at Physical Plant were a little skeptical about this one (*who am I kidding, we were all skeptical about it*), but agreed to give it a try.

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Campus apartments - four communities

Then we ordered common supplies that our residents would previously contact Physical Plant to obtain: light bulbs, fire alarm batteries, bunk bed pegs, shower curtains and clips, sink strainers, toilet plungers (we were empowering our residents to plunge their own toilet), fire extinguishers, even brooms, mops, and a mop bucket. Our residents could get these items directly from Residence Life and no longer had to contact Physical Plant to issue a work request.

Regarding training, it would not do for any one of us to *not* know how to do any of the tasks we were going to ask our residents to do; this turned into a really fun part of the overall effort. Area coordinators and management staff went over the policy letter and practiced the tasks like it was finals week. We were going to train our entire complement of residents assistants so that by the time our residents arrived we would all be capable of teaching each resident any of these tasks.

What were the tasks? Change a light bulb, plunge a clogged sink or toilet, check a circuit breaker, check a ground-fault receptacle, and clean the filter on the through-the-wall HVAC unit. Then we added household tips such as not putting the rocks from your aquarium in the disposer (*don't laugh; I know some of you have had this same problem*), and when you turn your heater on for the first time in the cool season you may get some smoke as the dust burns off the heat element. Really, nothing complex, (*you would not want a resident to attempt to free-up a stuck disposer*), just those everyday tasks mom or dad probably did for them at home.

We had over a thousand work order requests from our residents to change

light bulbs. We let residents change their own bulbs if they are incandescent, and if they are fluorescent we taught our area coordinators and resident assistants to change them. *As a result, we are down to just a few work orders for light bulbs, and Physical Plant will now call me if they do get a work order to confirm the request before it gets processed.*

We had about 10,000 total work orders for Residence Life in 2001. At the end of the 2002-03 year we were down to an amazing 4,800 orders, all in the first year. Our goal was to try to cut that in half within two years. If we help ourselves and do the simple work requests, the Physical Plant department can concentrate on much larger problems, and we should be able to save some money. We are into the third year of this adventure and are now averaging about 3,000 work orders per year—considerably down from the 10,000 we started with.

We are continuing this effort and have a much stronger, *partnered* relationship with Physical Plant. We are no longer just a customer or part of the problem for them. We are part of the team and part of the solution. We do what we can to help ourselves whether it's changing our own light bulbs, plunging a toilet, or cleaning out our basement. It saves our precious resources for where they are needed most. 🏠

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¹Software developed in consultation with Jack Dudley, P.E., Editor and Co-Author of the First Edition of the *Custodial Staffing Guidelines* and Co-Author of the Second Edition. Mention of APPA does not imply endorsement of the product.

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