

Toolbox Talk: Portable Space Heater Safety

Introduction/Overview:

Most state employees work in areas with heat, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) and do not require additional HVAC equipment. However, an employee may request to use a portable heater. Using a portable heater in the office exposes the agency and employees to potential fire and burn hazards. The easiest way to control these hazards is not to allow portable space heaters in areas with preexisting HVAC systems. On occasion, an employee may need to work in an unheated location, or a manager may allow a worker to use a portable heater. This is especially true if the worker is located in a “cold spot.” If this practice is permitted, then established guidelines should be followed.

Statistics:

Between the years [2013 and 2015](#), 1,650 fires occurred because of portable heaters. Within this number, 90 fatalities occurred. The vast majority of these fires occurred in the residential environment; only two percent occurred in commercial buildings. The low percentage may be due to the prohibition of portable heaters in these environments. Other reasons may include safe work practices and only allowing heaters of the oil radiator design with tilt and temperature shut-offs.

Talking Points:

Most Commonwealth agencies have strict rules for using portable heaters in the work environment. All stakeholders should be consulted before management makes a decision.

If, after consultation, and if management approves this practice, then the following should be observed:

- The heater should be of an oil radiator type design with automatic temperature and tilt shut-off features.
- All electrical components must be in good condition.
- Never allow an employee to bring a heater in from home.
- Never place heater within 36 inches of combustible material.
- Do not place an electrical cord where it creates a trip hazard.
- Ensure the heater is plugged directly into a wall socket and never a power strip or surge protector.
- When using an extension cord, management must ensure that the cord can handle the wattage, and documentation should be maintained attesting to this fact.
- Ensure the heater is shut off and has time to cool down before leaving.
- The Virginia Department of General Services has guidelines for portable heaters in their [Tenant Handbook](#).

Developed by:

Additional Discussion Notes:

Final Thoughts:

Remember, if an employee is allowed to use a portable heater in the office, the employee should follow the above talking points. If these talking points are not followed, significant property damage and severe injuries may occur.

NOTE: Always promote discussion with the attendees. If a question comes up that no one in attendance can answer, please contact the Office of Workers' Compensation or the Loss Control Innovations consultants for assistance.

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