

Risk Management Considerations for Temporary Outdoor Shelters



Photo: Winnipeg Free Press

Tents and temporary shelters are used for a variety of outdoor activities. They can range in size from small portable units to the very large units covering several hundred square feet. Tent and temporary structure safety is an increasing concern due to rising frequency and severity of accidents. According to a recent insurance study, tents ranked second in frequency and fourth in severity for all equipment types involved in rental accidents/incidents resulting in claims.

Insurance reports reference numerous fatalities due to people falling from heights, contacting power lines during installation and due to fires within these structures. Improper installation, maintenance, weather, and slips, trips and falls all threaten safe tent and temporary structure use.

Tent and temporary structure safety tips

Preferably, tents and temporary structures should be rented/purchased from well-known manufacturers with proven designs, low product liability and minimal recall activity. Installing a tent or temporary structure correctly is essential to providing a safe structure.

Make sure to work with the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ). All local fire inspectors must approve in writing.

Long-term tents are only permitted to be used on a temporary basis. They should not remain in place for more than 180 days.

Location and placement:

- Site survey – Before installing tent, survey the area to determine if location is suitable (Away from power lines, telephone lines, trees etc.).
- Obtain required permits and consult building officials before installation.
- Ensure the area and surface is suitable with adequate drainage in case of wet weather or melting snow.
- Check for underground utilities to ensure tent anchor pins do not contact utilities.
- Check for any overhead utilities to reduce possible contact during installation.
- Do not block fire department access.
- Do not locate with 20 ft. of the school or other buildings.
- Do not block the means of egress from other buildings.
- Maintain at least 10 ft. (3m) around tent clear of any combustibles.

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Tent Construction and Installation:

- Tent material must meet Manitoba Fire Code Standards for fire retardancy, and flame spread.
- Tents must be installed by a qualified tent installer that is trained in the set up, anchoring and supporting of large tent structures.
- We recommend that tents be rented from a qualified tent rental dealer with qualified installation staff.
- Rental dealer must carry at least \$5 million liability insurance coverage and provide a Certificate of Insurance with the school division listed as a named insured.
- Tent support / anchor lines must be equipped with Hi-Res covers or markings to reduce trip and fall hazards around the tent.

Fire Safety:

- Tent material must meet Manitoba Fire Code Standards for fire retardancy, and flame spread
- Smoking within the tent or within 20 ft. of the tent is not permitted and a “No Smoking” sign needs to be posted.
- A fire extinguisher is required within the tent.
- **No heating units are permitted in the tent.**
- No decorations will be permitted that could threaten structural stability or present a fire hazard.

Weather Issues:

- If severe weather conditions arise to the extent that tent should not be used as shelter, it must be evacuated immediately (Wind rating available from manufacturer).
- Snow load is a major concern for tent collapse.
- Regular checks to remove snow / ice build up from the roof must be done.
- All inspections and removal work must be documented to reduce liability.

Some Guidelines to minimize the spread of COVID-19:

- Limit the occupancy in the tent (Determined by the size of the tent).
- Limit the number of students and teachers in tent and at each table (if used).
- Locate tables and chairs at least 6 ft. (1.8 m) apart.
- Clean and sanitize tables, chairs, and all touch points frequently.

Setting up small frame tents and canopies (temporary use only)

- Typically, small frame tents that do not require extensive anchoring and self-standing structures can be set-up and taken down without professional help.
- Users must recognize any possible hazards surrounding the area where the tent is to be setup (power lines, telephone lines, trees, etc.). They need to be careful with pole placement and handling.
- Maintain at least a 10 ft. (3 m) distance around the tent that is free of combustible material.
- Apply the same guidelines for Long Term tent where possible and reasonable.

Using tents safely

Avoiding modifications: Rental facilities providing tent-set up should inform customers of tent safety once the tent is installed. Schools should not modify the poles or stakes in any way after installation, and must not attach anything else to the tent or structure in such a way that it reduces the structural integrity or creates an additional hazard (e.g. lights). Long-term installations may require periodic inspection to document the tent integrity.

Weather issues: Tent and temporary structure users also should be aware of the weather. Approximately 70 percent of tent claims are weather-related. If severe weather conditions arise to the extent that the tent or temporary structure should not be used as shelter, it must be evacuated immediately. The wind velocity rating of the structure should be available from the manufacturer. Snow load is another concern. Regular checks to remove snow from the roof must be done.

Inside items: School should also be careful of items used in the tent or temporary structure. **Heaters are not permitted to be used as per MSIP guidelines. Outdoor Fire Pits are not allowed.**

Electrical wiring: Electrical wiring is not permitted as per MSIP guidelines.

Decorations: No decorations will be permitted which could threaten the structural stability of the tent or temporary structure.

Egress/Occupancy: The means of egress must comply with the requirements for the occupancy of the tent. It is important to determine the number of occupants in the space to ensure that there are an appropriate number of exits providing adequate exit capacity. Social distancing will be required as well as masks/sanitizers for prolonged use.