Tech Corner

Protecting Those Who Keep Us Comfortable

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HVAC technicians enter dozens of unfamiliar private residences every week. Their safety needs to be one of our first priorities. Our technicians have faced several challenges recently and it's concerning to notice the uptick in events. We work inside our clients' homes, in cramped attics, and secluded backyards. While technical hazards like electrocution and refrigerant burns are heavily emphasized in training, personal security is frequently overlooked. In an era where home invasions, property disputes, and defensive gun ownership are at an all-time high, discussing personal safety for field technicians is no longer optional. It is a vital component of workplace safety.

The vulnerability of field technicians. Technicians face a unique set of safety risks that office-based employees don't encounter. Sure, the office staff get to deal with angry and demanding clients on the phone; however, technicians step into private property with unknown layouts and hidden hazards. Most residential service calls are performed by a single technician without immediate backup. When a technician is focused on diagnosing an HVAC system, their situational awareness drops. Customers are often stressed, uncomfortable, and angry about unexpected repair costs. Integrating personal safety into daily procedures should be prioritized and treated with the same rigor as lockout/tagout procedures. Technicians must be prepared for situations such as client hostility, being prevented from leaving, being denied access to their tools, or being threatened with a firearm or dangerous animal while exiting the property. We have all seen news stories about these types of incidents, and they seem to be occurring more frequently.

Situational awareness is the first line of defense; technicians must scan the environment before even exiting their service vehicle. Treat every arrival like a routine hazard assessment. Scan the property, look for broken windows, unchained or aggressive dogs, signs of domestic arguments before exiting your truck. Park for a quick escape by backing into the driveway or park on the street to ensure you cannot be blocked in. Keep your phone accessible, don't leave your phone in your tool bag, always keep it on your person. If a situation feels volatile or unsafe, do not enter. In those situations, call dispatch, you may need to leave immediately. If a situation does feel volatile, the technician must have the authority from management to abort the call without penalty.

De-escalation, technicians often bear the brunt of a customer's financial stress or physical discomfort. Tactics such as maintaining a calm demeanor, using non-threatening body language, and active listening. However, technicians must also know the boundary between an upset customer and a dangerous customer. Companies should consider the implementation of mandatory check-in protocols. Utilizing GPS tracking on fleet vehicles and smartphone safety apps with panic buttons ensures that dispatchers can immediately send help if a technician fails to check out of a job site. This is a "two-way street," technicians must do their part and check out of the call via whatever means their companies use, software on a tablet or phone call.

Navigating firearms in the home. No matter what your personal feelings on firearms are, the reality is millions of citizens legally own firearms. HVAC technicians may encounter guns in a home, that in itself is not automatically a threat. When the client intimidates or threatens a technician with the firearm is a problem. Finding an unsecured firearm in a work area can be a potential safety hazard. Politely inform the homeowner that a weapon is in the immediate work area and ask them to secure it. If the client refuses to secure the firearm or acts defensively, the technician should leave the premises immediately and document the incident with management. HVAC companies must establish explicit policies regarding whether technicians are permitted to carry personal firearms in company vehicles or on client property. Contractors may consider investing in personal safety training, providing communication tools, and foster a culture where technicians feel safe to voice concerns or walk away from dangerous situations.

Technicians should maintain situational awareness, never compromise personal boundaries for a quick fix, and report all safety related incidents. From the client's perspective, remember that technicians are guests performing a vital service in your home. Securing pets, clearing work pathways, and safely storing household firearms protects the person working hard to restore comfort to their home. Technical skills mean nothing if a technician does not make it home safely at the end of the shift. By elevating personal safety to the same level as electrical and mechanical safety, the HVAC industry can better protect its most valuable asset - its people.