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Wondering About WALK-INS?

Key considerations when it comes to expanding your cooler/freezer space.

BY DYLAN ROCHE

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Storage space.

Few school nutrition operations take it for granted in the best of times, but what about since the pandemic turned "normal" product delivery on its ear? Storage—especially refrigerated and freezer space—has become an urgent concern. With distributors making less-frequent delivery drops and schools needing to buy as much supply of certain items as possible when they're actually available, districts may be re-prioritizing their equipment wish lists to explore the purchase of a walk-in.

But doing so is a far cry from buying most other foodservice kitchen appliances, even intimidating combi-ovens or cook-chill systems. When you're faced with the prospect of having to choose a walk-in refrigerator or freezer for your school cafeteria, the level of overwhelm can get very real very quickly. How do you find the right option for keeping the food chilled without losing *your* chill in the process?

Don't worry! This overview gives you a head start on your research process, identifying many of the key areas for consideration, from the amount of space needed and location choice to energy efficiency features and overall cost expectations.

Why Walk-Ins Are a Must

How frequently you receive food deliveries at your district warehouse and/or at individual serving sites varies based on numerous factors. But it's probably safe to say that you're not getting just-in-time deliveries of fresh and frozen products. In fact, it's also probably safe to say that delays experienced across the supply chain have exacerbated the situation. "Instead of getting a delivery every week, [schools] might be getting deliveries every two weeks or once a month," says Dan Parsenow, Regional Sales Manager, Polar King International, an Indiana-based manufacturer of walk-in coolers and freezers. "So, they need more space to store more stuff."

A walk-in gives school cafeterias the ability to store the products they buy in bulk, particularly in an organized, accessible way, instead of cramming them all into a space that's way too small for their needs. "Walk-ins add ease of visibility and storage because of the space," says Kathryn Hollon, Director at Pasco Foodservice Equipment & Supplies, a Texas-based dealer. "I think we

all have had experience finding that forgotten can of food in the back of a dark, small pantry cabinet." With the spaciousness a walk-in can provide, that's no longer a concern.

Virtually any foodservice operation can benefit from a walk-in, which gives significantly more storage space than a reach-in model. "The only time we would *not* recommend a walk-in would be if space does not allow for one or if there are few enough meals being served so that stand-alone cold storage equipment is adequate," Hollon explains.

Fundamental Features

Walk-ins come in all kinds of sizes, with all kinds of temperature controls and safety features. Some are designed to be installed inside a school kitchen, while others are intended to be installed outside the facility. Some are large enough to include prep space within the unit.

Polar King is one manufacturer that custom designs walk-ins to the particular needs of the site and then delivers the fully assembled unit to campus. It can create units ranging in size from as small as 6x6 feet to as large as 16x65 feet. The industry also has quick-ship units that come in preconfigured sizes and may be available in single models or as a combination cooler/freezer.

One important area for school food-service operators to consider, recommends Polar King Regional Sales Manager Patrick Smith, is how supplies will be transferred to and from the unit. Keep in mind both the requirements of the delivery truck that's initially stocking the unit and of the food-service team that is moving ingredients and items for preparation, short-term storage

and service. Are items coming in and out via carts, two-wheel dollies or full pallet loads? "If they're going to be moving pallets in and out, we need to know that so we can build it with the right size door and the right kind of floor," he explains. Indeed, be sure to ask about the maximum weight capacity of the flooring.

Keri Inman, Product Manager for Kolpak, a Tennessee-based manufacturer of refrigerated equipment, identifies an additional important feature for consideration: the way the walk-in is insulated. Most panel-style walk-ins have an exterior and interior metal finish—also referred to as the skin—that sandwiches insulation materials. "There are all types of walk-in [insulation] panels used in the foodservice industry: polyurethane, polystyrene, Styrofoam," she details.

Walk-in panels are expected to meet a standard R-Value, or R-Factor, which is the material's rating to resist conductive heat flow. The Department of Energy (DOE) provides guidance on what is required to insulate successfully, Inman says. "DOE energy codes require a minimum R-value of R-25 for coolers, R-32 for freezers and R-28 for freezer floors. While this is a DOE standard, not all walk-in manufacturers provide these foam code specifications, or they will offer different panel thicknesses in order to achieve it."

It's also important to look at the electrical grid integrity, Hollon points out. "If walk-ins are affected by frequent power outages or breaker issues, then products are in jeopardy for food loss," she says. "Most walk-ins for K-12 include remote refrigeration/compressors housed on a single-story roof above the unit or at ground-level on an outside concrete pad." With a large, outdoor installation, for example, Polar King estimates that a school will typically need access to 220 volts of electricity, depending on the size and the type of refrigeration placed on the unit.

Energy efficiency is a related feature to review with manufacturer representatives and dealers. In addition to checking the R-values, inquire about the overall construction features. Parsenow and Smith explain that Polar King's outdoor units employ a seamless fiberglass construction that retains the R-value of the insulation to extend the life of the walk-in and keep a check on the electricity bill. (It also prevents moisture penetration, virtually guaranteeing no risk for rust or deterioration of insulation.)

Other questions to ask a dealer or a manufacturer's representative include:

- Must the unit be placed on a concrete slab or (particularly for outdoor walk-ins) can it be installed on asphalt, grass or gravel?
- How is an outdoor unit expected to stand up to snow loads, heavy winds, hailstorms and flooding?
- Can you customize the number of compartments within a large unit? Is there a limit?
- Is shelving available or included in the purchase package?
- What kind of lighting options are available?
- What local codes do I need to be aware of?

Remember that if you're investing in a walk-in refrigerator or freezer, it's likely to be both the most expensive piece of kitchen equipment you will have and the most frequently used. Take your time and consider all the features of units on the market.

What About Safety?

Anxious about entering your walk-in, having the door slam behind you and trapping you inside when nobody is around to let you out? Team members can put those fears aside. Walk-ins come with safety features specifically designed to prevent such risks.

Federal law dictates that doors on walk-ins must swing outward, not inward, to minimize the risk of the user accidentally shutting the door while in the unit. Many manufacturers construct walk-ins with safety handles, as well as with doors that can be unscrewed from the back side. In addition, inquire about the availability of an internal panic button that allows users to sound an alarm and alert others that they need help inside the unit.

Physical safety is generally less of a risk than food safety, which can occur when the temperature rises to levels that cause spoilage. This can happen when doors are left propped open, warns Hollon, adding that the other primary culprit is a power outage—especially if the power is lost for a period and then restored, all without your knowledge, such as over a weekend or holiday break. Following HACCP protocols to regularly monitor refrigerated equipment and the individual foods stored within is essential. But you also should ask about the availability of technology that automatically records hourly temperatures within the walk-in and even sends an alert to a designated staffer if temps rise out of the food-safe zones for frozen and refrigerated items.

Take Care to Take Care

Any major appliance, especially one that gets as much use as a walk-in unit, requires you take care of it—and with proper maintenance, from regular cleaning to occasional servicing, you can ensure this major investment serves your operation well for years to come.

Start by making certain that staffers avoid leaving the door open for prolonged periods of time. Hollon reveals that propping doors open while making multiple trips to stock or remove items is a common problem. Even worse is leaving the walk-in door open to help cool down an area of the kitchen! "When this happens, staff is overworking a system that is not designed for that type of usage. This can cause repeated service issues that are not considered warranty—and these cost money."

In general, Hollon also recommends working with a local factory-authorized refrigeration company to provide regular checks and services. Additionally, if there are damaged parts—such as a door hinge, vinyl strip or compressor cover—you should replace these sooner rather than later.

Smith notes that Polar King's fiberglass units offer the advantage of being easy to clean. "Most panel box-style walk-ins require re-caulking of all the seams every year to clean them," he asserts. Without seams, the fiberglass model just needs to be washed when dirty.

Foodservice Equipment & Supplies magazine recommends additional maintenance steps:

- Clean the walk-in daily to address dirt that is tracked in by staff, as well as if any prep work is being done inside the walk-in or if fresh produce is stored in open bins.
- Keep door gaskets clean, wiping them down with soap and water to prevent bacteria and mold growth.
- Inspect gaskets for wear and tear. Without a good seal, moisture can enter the compartment and freeze up the evaporator or flood the drain pan or the floor of the cooler. If door gaskets are cracked or stiff, they will need to be replaced.
- Don't use the top of a walk-in for long-term storage. You don't want to damage the ceiling panels.
- Avoid setting holding temperatures too low, as this can cause the system to overwork.
- For outside walk-ins, make sure that condensing units have clear and adequate airflow. Don't allow trash or weeds to accumulate around the area.
- Clean evaporator and condensing coils twice a year according to the manufacturer's instructions. If the unit is located outside, you may need to clean the coils more frequently.
- Make sure fan blades are clean to reduce drag.
- Ask a service technician to check all connections for the refrigeration hardware. This includes loose wires that can trigger a high amperage and cause the unit to use more energy.
- Check the door sweep for tears and make sure it seals properly against the threshold.

- Frost buildup on interior panel surfaces indicates that the unit is not holding appropriate temperatures for safe food storage. Higher-than-expected electric bills also may indicate leaks in the unit.

Invest in the Future

Manufacturers agree: The cost of a walk-in unit will vary greatly. It's not just about size either, according to Parsenow and Smith, who say the smallest unit Polar King produces will be around $12,000 or $13,000 and then increase from there. But it's not a price based purely on square footage—it's about how much refrigeration is required.

Hollon concurs with this. "A walk-in box combo for K-12 facilities can average $20,000," she says. "This can sometimes include standard refrigeration, or a customer can anticipate another $10,000 for more specialized refrigeration equipment—and then an installer cost averaging $12,000 to 15,000." But, she emphasizes, a walk-in that's installed properly and cared for correctly can be expected to last around 15 years.

The Size of It

You've considered walk-in features, safety measures, maintenance and cost. But with all of these options being equal and a good fit for your cafeteria's needs, take care not to underestimate how important size will be in how effective this walk-in is for your school meal operation. More storage space means more product on hand and the need for fewer deliveries—and that's the most critical reason for a walk-in cooler/freezer.

"You can't go too big," Parsenow concludes. "If you're going to buy one, and you're on the fence about size, go a little bit bigger because you're *always* going to be able to fill it."

Given the likelihood of current supply chain disruptions to continue at least another year—and possibly reshape distribution expectations into the future—school nutrition operations that have long relied on just-in-time deliveries may find that this business model has gone cold. Purchase of a walk-in to expand storage space could be a smart strategy for changing times. SN+

Dylan Roche is a freelance writer based in Arnold, Md. Photos courtesy of Pasco Foodservice Equipment & Supplies and Polar King International.

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