"Make Room for the Ladies!"
Gender Accommodations in the Station

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Considering all of the rescue industry technology changes of the past 30 years, nothing has created more need to reevaluate how stations are designed than the increased female representation now found on the department member rosters. While the male/female ratio among fire-fighters and EMS departments does not yet match the ratio in the general population, the number of females in most departments have increased by several hundred percent over the past few decades.

Some departments have addressed this issue by not addressing it. "We'll treat'em just like one of the guys" is a comment I hear from time to time. If your government unit or department has made that response your policy, I'm sure it was based on sound review and advice. However, many departments have found that to avoid potential sexual harassment cases and other gender legal issues along with making each gender more comfortable, facility consideration should be made.

The gender accommodation issue has most substantially affected the bunk room areas and the toilet/shower room areas.

Bunk Rooms

If permanent sleeping accommodations were even provided in older stations, it was usually in the form of one large room with four to thirty beds lining the walls…much like military barracks. We still encounter departments who prefer this method for all personnel in a new facility. Most departments that use this approach will provide some means of visual separation between sleepers, such as low, partition or cubicle walls.

Other departments provide complete gender separation by planning for two separate bunk rooms, one for male and one for female. While this approach does accomplish its task, efficiency failure is built into it. On design day you must project the ratio of male to female personnel so that the two rooms can be sized appropriately. Do you plan for a ratio of 90/10? 80/20? 50/50? One thing is guaranteed. Whatever ratio you select, you will be wrong. The male/female ratio will likely change each year and possibly, each month. The result of this approach is usually an over-crowded male bunk room and a near empty female bunk room.

Another approach is providing several, multi-person (2-6 beds) bunkrooms. The theory is that at least one of the rooms will be for females. Then as the female population grows, more of the smaller bunk rooms will be transferred. This approach still provides an inefficient occupancy rate similar to the two-room approach.

The solution we are seeing most departments implementing is an approach that not only satisfies the male/female issues, but also provides privacy for all personnel. That approach is several individual sleep rooms. These rooms typically house one bed (three if a cold-sheet policy is requested), three or four wardrobe lockers, and a small desk. No matter what the male/female ratio is or will become, this approach will always satisfy the need and provide privacy to all. Not to mention better sleep when you don't have a snoring bed-neighbor who sounds like a freight train!

This approach adds approximately 30% more space to the sleeping areas of the station. For an average station that sleeps six, this cost could be approximately $30,000 in today's construction climate. While $30,000 is nothing to sneeze at, it represents less than 2% of the construction cost for the average station.

Individual Sleep Room Example

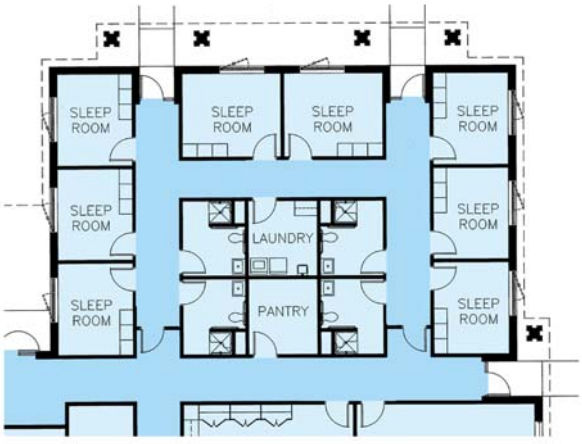
Toilet/Shower Rooms

Much like the bunk rooms in older stations, one large toilet/shower room use to satisfy all the facility needs. A few departments still take a modified version of this approach, even with the addition of female personnel. This results in one large space with fully enclosed toilet rooms and shower rooms off of that space. Shared vanity counters and sinks are provided for both genders in the large space.

The second approach is to provide two separate toilet/shower rooms like you would expect to find at most health clubs. Like the similar bunk room scenario, the challenge lies in projecting the accurate male/female ratio. In other words, there will always be occupancy inefficiency.

Corresponding to the individual bunk room approach is the individual toilet/shower room. This is a room with one sink, one water closet, and one shower. The individual toilet/shower room will always satisfy any male/female ratio. One person, male or female, goes in and locks the door.

There is typically no noticeable increase in square feet to the individual toilet/shower room approach. However, you will increase the number of plumbing fixtures provided. The overall increase in cost to the entire construction cost is insignificant.



Partial Plan Showing Individual Sleep Rooms and Toilet/Shower Rooms

Conclusion

Your departments approach to gender separation is likely driven more by policy than facility requirements. Whatever your policy, the proper facility accommodation can be made with the right planners and designers on board.

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