

Managing laundry rooms for happy residents and lower costs

How many complaints have you had this month about your laundry rooms? Maybe they are coming from residents, or maybe they are coming from your budget office! Repairing, maintaining and replacing washing machines and dryers can get expensive. And when you factor in the associated costs of damage they have done (or could do) to residents' clothes or your building when they malfunction, you could be looking at some substantial losses.

Equipping laundry rooms with machines that have the proper capacity is an essential step. Having multiple machines of differing capacities and labeling them clearly can be a real problem solver since people are less likely to overload washers when cost-effective options are convenient. That cuts down on leaks, motor burnout and other user-caused damage. Having dryers that offer a variety of capacities and heat settings will also help reduce energy waste, overheating and damage to clothing.

Make sure residents understand how to clean lint filters, use the right amount of soap and prevent damage to the equipment. That can be part of their introductory tour of the facilities but should also be reinforced by instructive signage in the laundry room. Educating users on the importance of closing fire doors is another good way to reduce your potential losses if an incident should occur.

For your part, insist on a solid maintenance regimen for your laundry areas. Not only should they be kept clean to the eye of the user, they should also be cleaned inside—meaning drains are checked and cleared daily, hoses and couplings are inspected daily for wear or displacement, filters and dryer exhausts are cleaned and clear, heating elements and electrical connections are eyeballed for any fire or shock hazards, and floors are cleared of things that could cause slips and falls. The locks and latches on the doors to the room and the doors to the equipment should also be checked for operational problems. Remember that good recordkeeping of your maintenance can help if you do have an insurance claim.

If you are tired of dealing with the theft temptation presented by coin-op machines, consider card-reader technology that allows users to pay by debit cards or pre-filled payment cards designed for the machines. Do these raise issues of data protection? That would be an excellent question to talk about with your insurance agent. If you own the machines and handle the financial transaction, it could be an additional exposure for you.

If it's time to refurbish your laundry room, you might want to consider the benefits of leasing equipment. You will have to carefully review the contract to make sure equipment breakdown and associated damage is insured properly so you aren't stuck with a bill for uninsured damage to property because of machine malfunctions. Most companies that lease commercial laundry room equipment also have a service plan, so be sure it is adequate and doesn't leave you fielding resident complaints.

Increasingly, apartment complexes are moving away from the old model of windowless, basement vaults that were kind of creepy and certainly not places you'd stay in while your wash ran through its cycles. Main-floor, windowed spaces with bright lights, sitting areas, TVs and workstations are common. They allow for better security and can promote community interaction. And upgraded appliances can save money on energy and repairs in the long run. If you opt to upgrade, talk to your insurance agent to make sure your new equipment is covered by your apartment owners insurance policy.

An inviting laundry room can actually be a great selling point to prospective tenants, so design with sales in mind!