

Successful management of storage units

The duties of apartment property managers frequently include managing and caring for the apartment building's storage units. This includes monitoring the storage area for safety risks, for damage to storage cages or spaces, and for hazards to residents and property from stored materials.

While some buildings use lockable cages in basements, others opt for solid-sided lockers that offer privacy or even provide outbuildings that are similar to sheds. The latter typically include a private door and locking devices and are built to withstand water and 90-mph winds. In many cases, a storage-unit company will build these to match existing buildings, then – under contract – maintain the units, collect rent for use of the units, and insure them. For residential complexes that opt to provide and manage storage without contracting out, there are many considerations.

Storage units provided by the apartment complex are convenient for residents and a great way to store outdoor things that won't fit in the residence. Chairs for sporting events, tents for camping, fishing poles, etc. are all things that are far more conveniently stored in a storage compartment. But some residents go beyond and store very valuable possessions. In Wisconsin recently, for example, six storage compartments were pried open, and thousands of dollars in cash, collector coins, jewelry and wine were stolen.

Some of the risks associated with storage units, like theft and vandalism, are obvious, but there are other risks property managers need to be aware of. Residents may store flammable liquids or chemicals that, were they to ignite or leak, could cause major damage to the building, the property of others or cause illness or injury. If units are allowed to be dirty or wet, they could attract insects or cause mold to grow. And storing food in units is a sure way to attract bugs, rats, and other unwanted visitors. While property managers can't prevent all problems associated with storage compartments, there are things that should be done to protect the complex from accusations of negligence and liability for injury, illness or property damage.

Clear Rules, Enforcement and Maintenance

Regular inspection of resident storage units should ensure that there are no dangerous contents and that items are safely and securely stored. Notification of the rules is also important. Lease documents should contain rules regarding proper use of residential storage space, and reminders should be posted in or near the compartments. Residents need to know that their private storage units can and will be opened by building personnel if needed for safety purposes or due to violations of the rules.

Take, for instance, a resident who creates a fire hazard in their storage unit. Upon discovery, such a violation could need immediate rectification, which could require authorized entry and removal of the their possessions. If lease agreements are not clearly written, property managers may be exposed to liability claims for missing or damaged goods that were moved, even if it was done for safety reasons.

The safety of users is a primary concern. You can improve overall security by adding motion-sensing lights or even security cameras. Keep lighting in storage areas in working order to minimize mishaps and deter criminals. If the unit is in a common area, posted reminders about shutting and locking the door upon entry and departure can help keep out troublemakers. Routine checks on and maintenance of locks should be standard operating procedure.

Talk to your insurance agent about insuring against damage caused by storage-unit related incidents. Depending on where the units are located, what they contain, and how they are managed, coverage will vary. Sometimes these are income-generating spaces and need to be treated as such. Your agent will be able to advise you on protecting against property, income and liability losses pertaining to resident storage areas. There may also be fire code regulations and other rules the complex must follow, so make sure you are in compliance.

Please share your thoughts or questions.

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