

# NAHP Update

## Reinforcing Staff with Qualified Contractors

BY JOHN E. LEONARD

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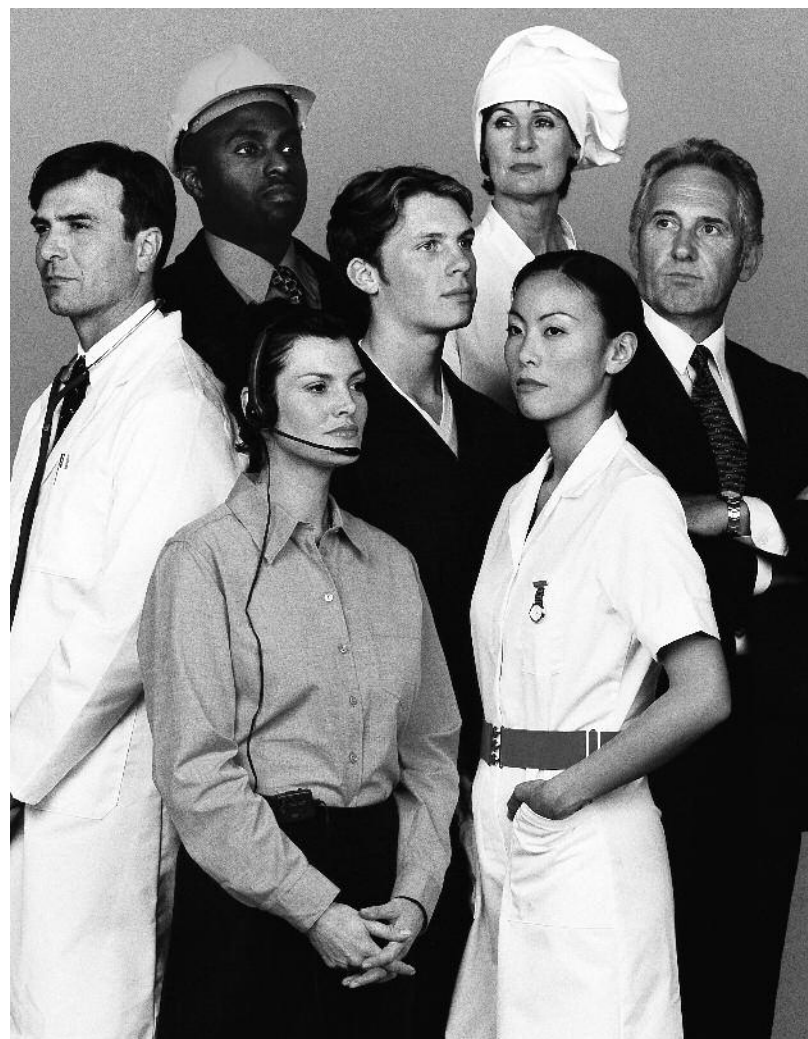
For superior maintenance of your property, you need an adequate budget, a proactive plan, and professionals with the skills and experience to handle a wide range of tasks. After all, they're called housing complexes for a reason.

But how do you develop a crew of skilled workers who are not only good at what they do but reliable, affordable, and reachable?

With permanent staff, you can develop close relationships, work on gaps in training or ability, build an extreme familiarity with the physical properties themselves, and set a pace and pattern that together keep your property safe, secure, and looking good.

When all is running smoothly, you may be able to handle all maintenance duties with your in-house staff. However, today's mechanical and engineering requirements, along with the aging and hard use of many assisted housing properties, may require you to augment your staff.

In fact, rather than relying on contract staff just for major projects and emergencies, you may find it advantageous and cost-effective to develop a corps



of talent that can help keep your property in top shape every season. Funding is tight and each dollar needs to create at least a dollar's worth of impact.

Along the way, you may also find that the attributes of in-

house staffing that you've come to admire—the teamwork, the reliability, the easy availability of arms and legs for quick deployment, the clear communication and understanding that comes from a team work-



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ing together every day—can be achieved by applying the same principles to developing a contractor team.

### SOME GENERAL QUESTIONS

While assisted housing has its own set of requirements that must be met, take a step back and ask yourself the following general questions.

**Where are the best contractors?** If you haven't already formed your contractor team, the optimal place to look is through your network of colleagues and other professionals who have your same level of quality expectations. As you ask around, you'll discover that a lot of the same names get mentioned repeatedly. As you narrow your list, you'll come up with just a few names at the top. Researchers sometimes liken this approach to a Delphi method of accurately forecasting performance. Scientific or not, you'll discover that the

process yields common-sense candidates for your contracts.

Depending on your contracting rules and regulations requiring bids, the list of most mentioned contractors are likely the ones you want to work for you. Chances are they are busy—which is another piece of evidence that they deliver and can handle the challenges of your projects.

Take the time to examine their work portfolios early in the process. In the Internet age, many contractors post their capacities and their successes online. While this may render their best public face, it also gives you a quick preview of what they can do.

#### Which is the right one?

Before you can figure out who's the best for the job, you need the clearest description possible of your project. Many organizations use customized or standardized project planning resources and software for this step, greatly reducing the possibility of leaving out critical information. One extra step to think about is sharing your plan with a staffer for feedback. Even nonprofessionals can give you a sounding board on whether the plan is understandable—even if they don't know all of the terminology. The goal is to be clear in content and in communication.

"We have to go out for bid again!" can be a common refrain of frustration around property management offices, but encourage staff and managers to focus on the bright

side of a multiple-bid process. One, the process commits contractors to offer updated, market-driven ideas and prices and, two, you inject a level of competition that can result in lower costs and better service.

**When you're ready to go fast, should you slow down?** Even with a prescribed process, selecting the right contractors can be an art as well as a scientific process. To avoid a mad rush in making a decision, make sure you schedule time in your selection process to be a professional skeptic.

Double-check the contractor's references. If possible, visit a job that they've completed or are finishing. Run another check with business rating services such as the Better Business Bureau, industry associations, local government, their other clients, and online sources that can help you feel good about your decision. If you have any questions about licenses, bonds, training, and equipment necessary for the job, now is the time to be ruthless in your investigation.

The reason many people don't notice the red and yellow flags flying in front of their faces is that they have their heads buried in their work or eyes fixed on the future project or crises. Selecting the right contractor is important—not only for your financial stewardship reasons but because their work ultimately will affect the quality of life in your housing complex.

**Getting to signature?** In an

industry very familiar with change orders and alterations, it's important to start a relationship with a new contractor as solidly as possible. The heart of that relationship is the contract. Use your standard services contract for more common maintenance and repair tasks. Build on the standard contract for more complex tasks. The goal is to produce a clear and concise document that doesn't throw curveballs at your financial managers and reviewers, but still zooms in on exactly what needs to be accomplished.

Pull out your checklist and make sure the contract includes project launch and completion dates, schedule of payments, materials specs in industry standard terms, line of communications and decision-making, and the process for making changes to the project plan. If your contract template doesn't include such specifics as who secures permits and when and how cleanup tasks are to be accomplished, you would be advised to add them. During your conference with your perspective contractors, you can clarify and sharpen contract components. However, if they are missing in the first place, it is much more difficult to do so.

Take a look at how they conduct their business off-site. Is the contractor prepared to deliver regular invoices and statements with the documentation you need—or will you need to pull teeth each time?

Since you deal with public and investor funds, you need a

contractor who understands accountability and transparency in the billing process, and who has a back office that can respond. Anything less will yield frustrations and potential problems during financial reviews and audits.

#### **What's the right-size contractor team for our property?**

One quandary for many property management operations is determining whether to act as an in-house general manager for specialists or to hire the comprehensive firm that can supply all the specialties needed. The size of the complex, the size and skills of in-house staff, and budget may drive you toward one option or the other. With a spreadsheet, you can compare costs of both approaches.

Don't be surprised if it appears you can save money by taking on the management and coordination yourself. However, the opportunity cost could be a loss of your time for other functions necessary to keep your property running smoothly—and an increase in your worry level.

While you want to keep your contractor pool manageable, you also want it robust enough to handle difficult or emergency situations. Housing management is a 24/7 proposition. Although hiring one dependable contractor for a key maintenance area such as plumbing or heating makes sense in some ways, unless the contractor can fix a disaster at midnight, you should search

for an alternative or a backup.

A note on contract retainers: they may help generate a better response but will never ensure that an understaffed contractor will be able to meet your pressing need. Carefully match contractor capacity with your actual needs; don't expect a contract clause to magically fill in the gaps.

**How do I keep the outsourcing manageable and successful?** The answer is in the question—by being an on-your-toes manager. All of the other facets of quality management apply when dealing with contractors:

A good plan that's shared and understood by all parties.

■ Strong communication.

■ Clear expectations.

■ An attitude of trust combined with verification.

■ A focus on proaction and prevention rather than reaction and crisis.

■ A celebration of jobs done well.

Developing a pool of trusted contractors can help keep your property performing at its peak and providing a terrific asset for your residents and your community. The next time you're facing a major renovation project or struggling with pesky and seemingly intractable maintenance tasks, consider beefing up your impact with the talent that exists beyond your own organization. **NU**

*John E. Leonard is a writer, editor and communications manager based in Silver Spring, Maryland.*

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*NAHP Update* is published four times a year by the National Affordable Housing Management Association, 400 North Columbus St., Suite 203, Alexandria, VA 22314, Phone (703) 683-8630, Web site: [www.nahma.org](http://www.nahma.org)

**SUBSCRIPTIONS:** Complimentary to NAHMA credential holders.

**QUERIES:** Letters to the Editor and other queries should be sent to NAHMA Coordinator, Training, Education & Special Programs Tim Bishop at [tim.bishop@nahma.org](mailto:tim.bishop@nahma.org) or to the address above.

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# The Importance of Thorough Inspections

Having great residents isn't just a matter of luck. We all dream of the perfect residents, taking care of their apartments like they own them, contacting us promptly before small problems grow into large ones, bringing in the rent check on the first of each month, and never, ever, ever damaging the property.

Seasoned landlords and property managers know that gambling with the condition of their properties is never a sure bet! And even with regular inspections, managers and maintenance professionals discover "surprises" all the time, most of them not the good kind of surprise!

As Ronald Reagan once said, "Trust, but verify." This is what inspections are all about.

A good thorough inspection plan protects your property and maintains the most important part of the asset—a good long term resident!

Here are five great tips for keeping your properties in good repair, if you conduct them on schedule and conscientiously.

## 1 THE MOVE-IN INSPECTION

Don't fool yourself! A "move-in" inspection is a must! A written inspection sheet is often a state requirement when taking a security deposit, and it will protect both the landlord and the resident by documenting issues. The resident must be present and should sign and date the document once the inspection is completed. This inspection merely documents the current condition and is not intended to be a wish list!

## 2 30-DAY MOVE-IN INSPECTION

This inspection provides the resident with information they may have missed in the midst

of their big move. Realize this it is also an opportunity to identify the initial condition of the property after the resident has moved in. Any damage caused by the resident, such as a door off its hinges or holes in walls, should be documented and addressed immediately. And, if there were any repairs overlooked during the turnover, get on them now!

## 3 ANNUAL INSPECTIONS

This is just like it sounds, an annual inspection, performed by you to ensure that the property is safe, all items are functional and the property is being maintained. This inspection is documented, supported by pic-

tures, signed by you with a copy provided to the tenant. If there are any issues, a follow-up inspection should be scheduled so you can verify the resident has corrected the issues they are responsible for.

## 4 PRE MOVE-OUT INSPECTION

It's never too soon to schedule this inspection, upon receipt of the Notice to Vacate from the resident, get in and get a look! This allows the maintenance staff to inspect the condition of the apartment and capital items, schedule outside contractors if needed and order capital items. Turning the apartment timely goes directly to the bottom line.

## 5 MOVE-OUT INSPECTIONS

The move-out inspection is your opportunity to determine the overall condition of the property when the tenant moves out. This inspection should be conducted by you at the time you receive the keys from the tenant. Ideally you want the tenant to sign the inspection findings. Any findings should be documented and expenses deducted from the security deposit.

Follow these tips to keep your eye fresh and see beyond the everyday:

**Change it up!** Decide how often you will do property

inspections, then "walk the walk," but take a different route each time you inspect your common areas and grounds. Common areas can look different from a back entrance or stairway!

**Invite a guest!** Including a key staff member, leasing agent or resident services coordinator adds a fresh eye to your inspection routine and offers new insight into site amenities and property appeal!

**Inspect everything!** Conduct all apartment inspections the same way. Enter and move from left to right through each room. This will help avoid missed areas in different style floor plans.

**Turn it on!** Open closets, look under sinks, test windows, and operate appliances to make sure everything is intact and operational. Check out any detached buildings such as storage sheds and garages to be sure your inspection gives you a full overview of the condition of the entire property.

**Put it on the calendar!** Let residents know when you will be inspecting their homes. Suggest they participate and ask for feedback on how they like living in the community.

Your goal should be to turn every new move-in into a good, long term resident. **NU**

Nancy Reno, CPM, is Vice President of Marketing and Training for Housing Management Resources, Inc.

# 'Tis the Season... for Maintenance!

Now that spring has sprung and we're into summer, make sure you have followed up on post-winter maintenance (assuming you live in the frigid north). After the winter thaw come the winds, the rain, the leaky pipes and roofs, the cracked paint, the weed surge, the potholes—need I say more? It's a time when property maintenance becomes a frantic rush to stay ahead of the routine schedule, so you can also tackle the unplanned issues.

**This is also a time that puts your retention rates at risk.**

Here's why: the *quality of maintenance* services tops residents' lists of all factors that influence retention (SatisFacts Research 2011 survey). Yes, you've got to get the job done, but keeping your residents satisfied with your maintenance efforts doesn't take perfection. It takes communication and coordination.

**When it comes to maintenance issues, nobody likes to be surprised!**

People become dissatisfied when their expectations are not met. This is good news for property managers. With timely communications and follow

up, you have more control. You set the expectations.

Put a maintenance communication plan in place and get your staff on board. Develop a communication plan with specific steps and stick to it. For example, when residents



request service:

1. Acknowledge requests as soon as you receive them.
2. Let the residents know the next steps: who will perform the service, when it will be scheduled, what will happen.
3. Confirm all appointments with residents.
4. Follow up with residents after every service call.
5. Continue to follow up until the maintenance is complete.

For general property maintenance:

1. Let residents know what will be happening, who will perform the service, when it will take place and if alternative actions are needed (e.g., "...*park in the north lot until repaving is finished on Tuesday*").

2. Notify residents when the maintenance is complete.

Electronic communications—your website, email, texts and phones—will make this heightened level of communication easier. Check out a message notification service. It can save you and your staff loads of time and be convenient for your residents, too.

Let your residents know that you are addressing their maintenance issues and that it's important that they are satisfied. It will pay off in the high-quality condition of your property ... and it will pay off at renewal time, too. **NU**

*Nick Frantz is the National Sales Manager for Property Management Solutions at One Call Now. For more information regarding resident communication solutions, please visit [www.onecallnow.com](http://www.onecallnow.com), or call (877) 698-3262 to find out how our text, email and voice messages can work for your community.*

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# Encouraging Residents to Move Up

**NAME:** Angela Barrows  
**POSITION:** Regional Manager  
**MANAGEMENT COMPANY:** Emmer Management Corp.  
**YEAR OF CERTIFICATION:** 2005

Working in affordable housing “kind of runs in the family,” Angela Barrows said, since her mother worked in the industry. She started her own career in 1984 as a part-time leasing agent on a conventional property while attending college. From there she moved over to the maintenance department before starting with her current company,

Emmer Management, in 1990 as the assistant manager on a Section 236 property. She remains with the company today, having worked her way up, to apartment manager, to property manager, to vice president and, finally, to settling in as a regional manager.

Barrows takes great pride in providing housing for people who are in need and values the relationships she’s developed with her dedicated team of 16 and residents. For Barrows and her team, one of the biggest challenges has been creating the sense of a transitional housing situation as opposed to a lifelong housing situation.

“In the beginning, affordable housing was used on more

of a temporary basis; people could get a job or go back to school and then they’d move on,” she said. “Now it’s almost become a lifestyle for a select group of people.” Barrows’ main focus is trying to reinstate the transitional aspect through education and motivational classes.

Her subsidized properties have clubhouses and resident associations on site, and often team up with local nonprofit organizations and schools to provide resume-building classes, dress for success events, and GED prep classes. Both of her subsidized properties have resident advisors on site to help keep residents motivated. Also under her purview is a student

conventional property.

Barrows has undergone numerous trainings through NAHMA and SAHMA. She is a Certified Professional of Occupancy (CPO) a NAHP-e, and has her green certification through NAHMA. Two of her properties went through the green retro fit program, which utilizes ARRA funds. Through SAHMA, she has attended multiple site-based budget specialist trainings.

Barrows has been with Emmer for 23 years. “I love what I do and my job,” she said. “I am very dedicated to the Emmer Group and family, but after 30 or more years, who knows? Maybe I will go back to school myself.” **NU**

PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROPERTY MANAGERS AND OWNERS

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 Alexandria, VA 22314  
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summer 2013  
**NAHP**update

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