

NAHPU Update

Snuffing Out Winter Hazards

BY CATHY SMITH

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The winter season has a tendency to reveal hazards that hide for much of the rest of the year. In many parts of the country, winter months require an extra measure of vigilance by property managers to ensure a safe environment for tenants, visitors and staff.

Unchecked, these hazards can cause harm to property and people—and even death. In a multifamily complex, so much of what goes on—and what can go wrong—happens within the confines of the residential units. So in addition to monitoring common areas, infrastructure and equipment, heads-up property management teams will anticipate tenant-caused safety issues and proactively offer guidance to tenants.

Here are five winter hazards that deserve your attention:

1. Blocked dryer exhaust vents. Each year, local media report on homeowners and property managers who face the wrenching chore of finding temporary shelter for families whose dryer fires force them out into the cold.

While the most common cause is a failure to clean out



CARLE BAGGE/CREATIVE COMMONS

the vent, some cases involve inaccurately placed or replaced vent systems. Check the bends in the ductwork and the exhaust exit points, especially if your property is prone to animal nesting or snow accumulation near the exhaust points.

In addition, tenants play a

huge role in dryer safety. If you have a common laundry room, make sure you post a checklist on proper use of the equipment. For dryer use, this would include emptying the lint screen or trap before each use; restricting flammable liquids from the dryer's vicinity; and



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SNUFFING OUT WINTER HAZARDS, *continued from page 1*

keeping any materials that have been in contact with flammable liquids—such as alcohol, cooking oils, gasoline, spot removers or motor oil—out of the dryer. This includes materials that have been washed and that they believe to be clean of the flammables.

and brain damage and/or death. See the Smart Advice column on page 5 for tips on preventing carbon monoxide poisoning. In your tenant communications and inspections, make sure that residents do not contribute to potential hazards by bringing in unauthorized sup-

and limb, property managers worry about the financial and legal liabilities. For workers at your complex, a bad fall can result in a worker's compensation claim. For tenants, it may spark a complaint or a costly lawsuit.

Check your adherence to



ELVERT BARNES PHOTOGRAPHY/CREATIVE COMMONS

2. Carbon monoxide buildup. It's fair to say that so many warnings about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning can tend to create a tune-out factor, both for managers and tenants. But the extreme peril warrants any excess of messages.

Carbon monoxide rapidly accumulates in the blood. If you're lucky, the poisoned air causes symptoms similar to the flu—headaches, fatigue, nausea, dizzy spells, confusion, and irritability—before someone intervenes. If not, and as levels increase, you can experience vomiting, loss of consciousness,

plemental heaters or by blocking ventilation.

3. Slip and fall accidents. Ineffective maintenance of pedestrian thoroughfares and common areas can contribute to slip, trip and fall incidents in any season. In winter, the stakes rise exponentially. Research indicates that as much as 80 percent of slip-and-fall accidents in snow or ice happen in parking areas or sidewalks. Complexes serving seniors need to be on high alert, as a large percentage of slip-and-fall accidents lead to serious injuries or fatalities in older people.

Beyond the concern for life

safety standards. For example: clear transitions from parking lot to sidewalk surfaces; utility covers flush with surfaces; lighting that illuminates walking areas during the longer periods of winter darkness; drains that may empty roof water into harmless areas most of the year and do not shoot water across frozen ground and onto walks, drives and parking areas in the winter; and curb cuts and ramps that meet ADA standards.

Inspect these elements during the non-winter seasons so you're ready for the extra steps needed during winter.

Schedule your plowing and sidewalk clearing to happen before your staff arrives and before tenants head out to school and work. Be aggressive—make it a professional goal to exceed your city’s or town’s requirements for snow and ice removal. Keep a log, both to gauge your snow/ice removal effectiveness and also to document your diligence.

Mount the snow in a part of the lot that will not impede driver or pedestrian sightlines, or obstruct congregating areas for public transportation or school buses. Moving the snow

to lower-lying spots and areas near drains will help keep refrozen snow-melt from affecting higher-traffic areas. In November 2014, you may need to haul snow to unused parts of your property or offsite altogether. Develop crisis weather and contingency sub-plans as part of your overall snow removal program. Negotiating with trucking and heavy equipment operators in the off-season is recommended, because the lines for their services will be long when extreme weather hits.

4. Burst pipes, water damage, and escaping heat. Shut off and drain outdoor faucets, hoses and conduits such as sprinkler systems. Caulk pipe and vent enclosures and insu-

late external plumbing as necessary. Remind them that:

- deep fryers and hibachi-style cookers are not meant for the indoors;
- grease and other debris buildup on ovens and cooktops can easily ignite;
- putting bicycles, tools, sports equipment and other materials in hallways adds to the hazards;
- table candles and warming trays with sterno can be festive but deserve extra monitoring, particularly if children live in or are visiting the apartment;
- the complex rules and regulations regarding portable

IN EXTREME SNOW EVENTS, such as those which hit Western New York State area

in November 2014, you may need to haul snow to unused parts of your property or offsite altogether.

late external plumbing as necessary. Despite the technical advances in caulking and insulating materials, it’s best to have your crew perform this task when the temperatures are around 50 degrees or higher. These steps can head off costly and dangerous ruptures in cold weather, proactively save energy, and make the living areas more comfortable. Tightening up the many gaps that leak heat also can lessen the need or desire of tenants to supplement their unit’s heat with portable or combustible devices.

5. Distracted tenants and altered routines. The winter months keep people indoors, and some activities typically done outdoors may be moved indoors, resulting in increased safety risks. Mount a communications campaign to alert residents to common dangers that increase during the “nesting” and holiday months of winter.

With an extra measure of care this winter, you can avoid contributing to one of the most dismal stories of winter life—that of thousands of dollars in property damage or, worse yet, injury or the loss of life. Snuff out the potential danger from winter before it becomes real. **NU**
Cathy Smith is editor of NAHP Update.

heaters, holiday lighting and overnight guests are readily available;

- boxes, shipping materials, and refuse from holiday events accumulate quickly and can cause safety problems for emergency personnel, visitors and family members alike; and
- manipulating heating, plumbing or electrical systems in order to “fix” a problem in their unit can cause disaster for others. Urge them to file a work order rather than take matters into their own hands.

With an extra measure of care this winter, you can avoid contributing to one of the most dismal stories of winter life—that of thousands of dollars in property damage or, worse yet, injury or the loss of life. Snuff out the potential danger from winter before it becomes real. **NU**
Cathy Smith is editor of NAHP Update.

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Thinking About Spring ‘Curb Appeal’

With parts of the nation pounded by early November winter weather, snow accumulation at eye level, and freezing temperatures in southern orange groves, the last thing that property managers may be thinking is, “Hmmm... I wonder what should be on our spring fix-up list?”

But grab a sweater, a hot drink, and a pair of shades for inspiration, and reflect on the coming season. Preparation now means a smooth transition to spring—one of the busiest seasons for property management staff.

As you get ready, consider the following: Spring cleanup and curb appeal work is refreshing and energizing, but there is a larger purpose at hand that goes well beyond producing a good-looking property.

Most likely, you work in an environment that values well-designed, well-maintained housing. However, even appearance-friendly managers can find themselves squeezed between their desire to keep their properties attractive and a lack of resources. In addition, restrictions from funders and regulators less sensitive to the property’s presentation can complicate the argument for curb appeal priorities. One

practitioner termed this the “tightrope walk” between the affordable housing mission and the reality of running an assisted property while keeping tenants, owners, funders, staffers, neighbors and local government happy.

Why does curb appeal matter for affordable housing?

No affordable housing manager strives to win spring beauty contests as the end goal for affordable housing. But astute managers recognize that appearance communicates something much deeper than the final coat of paint; curb appeal says “this management cares about the property and the

people who live here.”

Isn’t providing shelter and safety a more primary concern? Yes, maintaining and operating homes that are affordable, safe and healthy are mission-level goals. But rather than being at odds with those top goals, promoting a fresh, clean appearance complements

10 Practical Steps for Curb Appeal

- 1. Walk the property.** Take your maintenance chief with you, if possible, and invite your tenant council leader, too. Because you keep on top of maintenance issues, you likely know all of the big tasks for the spring. However, this is also your opportunity to view the property as others would. As final steps, view the property from the street line or sidewalk. Jump into your car and drive past the property, and then into the drive or parking area. What do you see?
- 2. Paint the entrance doors/trim in coordinating colors, including your office door if you have an onsite office.** Replace any missing or damaged door fixtures.
- 3. Trim shrubs and trees.** Depending on your climate, you may be able to get a head start on this task during the winter months. Consult your local extension service reps or urban forester. They have a wealth of information on plant and tree care, including information your landscaping staff or contractors may not know.
- 4. Check drives, parking lots and curbs.** Have sinkholes developed from winter heaving? Are there broken curbs from overly enthusiastic snowplowing? Are parking lines and space numbers clear and clean?
- 5. Touch up or replace address numbers.** These serve a cosmetic as well as safety role. Make sure any changes are in accord with local codes, as emergency responders need to be able to find residences quickly.
- 6. Realign gutters and downspouts.** Winter

weather can hammer these functional items into weird shapes. And nothing communicates disregard for property upkeep more than dangling gutters or downspouts that terminate well above the elbow.

7. Prepare beds for fresh planting, and make it an event. Even if paid staff or contractors normally handle your landscaping, consider engaging your tenants in the wholesome activity of community planting. You may not save money, but you will build cohesiveness and pride. Consider native plants for a unique look as well as potential water savings.

8. Clean up and touch up all signage. Clear off mildew and dirt, and repaint or touch up as necessary. Augment signage with coordinated plantings that are colorful but easy to maintain. Is this the year to add tasteful lighting to your signage?

9. Make your office sparkle. While your office may not be visible from the curb, the directional signage will quickly lead visitors there. Fix-ups absolutely should include your office space, inside and out.

10. Communicate your changes to residents and management. Residents will more likely appreciate and support the exterior work in the context of total property maintenance if you communicate the plan and the results to them. While they care about their own units, they also take pride in the overall property. Take before-and-after photos and share them in your newsletters, blogs and website.

the goals. Exterior appeal is not a frill.

Can we wait until we have the time and money? Property managers have to prioritize tasks every day, and unforeseen repair issues may crimp your ability to perform curb appeal improvements. However, curb appeal needs to be part of the overall maintenance work plan and a clearly defined item in the budget. Otherwise, the tendency will be to bump those tasks and expenditures for others deemed more pressing at the moment. Size up the challenge. Develop a plan. Work that plan.

Which fix-ups have the most impact? In terms of curb appeal, here are three that are often cited by managers of subsidized or nonsubsidized housing: painting of doors and trim; shrubs and plantings (and landscaping in general); and signage touchups.

But your priorities should be tailored to your property. Your walk-around inspection should help answer the question for you. For example, if you had significant winter damage to paved areas or to roofs, gutters and downspouts, you may well decide to put those items at the top of the list, as they are aesthetic as well as safety/preventative repairs.

Remember that caring about the perception of your property easily translates into caring about the viability and sustainability of affordable housing. Curb appeal expenditures are a smart investment in your property, your tenants, and your community. **NU**

Protect Against Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Q: What causes carbon monoxide poisoning, and how do I protect residents and property?

A: Carbon monoxide, or CO, is an odorless, colorless gas that can cause sudden illness and death. CO is produced by the incomplete burn of a fossil fuel. In enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces with gas ranges and heating systems, garages or fireplaces, CO can build up and poison people and animals.

The most common symp-

tom is that more than 500 Americans die from unintentional CO poisoning, and more than 2,000 commit suicides by intentionally poisoning themselves.

Pets often experience CO poisoning first because they are smaller than people and often are in the apartment or house for very long periods during the day.

The easiest way to prevent carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning is to make certain that all the units in all of your properties have carbon monoxide detectors, which is a require-

ment that many states require them within 10 feet. New Jersey requires them installed at occupancy.

You can find a brief listing of requirements by state at NCSL's website under Research.

To prevent CO exposure, the CDC recommends:

- Having your heating system, water heater and any other gas, oil, or coal burning appliances serviced by a qualified technician every year.
- Installing a battery-operated or battery back-up CO detector in all housing units and check or replace the battery when you

BE SURE TO CHECK with your state's department of health or your local housing agency to find out if CO detectors are required.

tom of CO poisoning are headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion. Unless suspected, CO poisoning can be difficult to diagnose because the symptoms mimic other illnesses. People who are sleeping or intoxicated can die from CO poisoning before ever experiencing symptoms.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), certain groups—unborn babies, infants, and people with chronic heart disease, anemia, or respiratory problems—are more susceptible to its effects. Each year, more

than 500 Americans die from unintentional CO poisoning, and more than 2,000 commit suicides by intentionally poisoning themselves.

ment of many states but not of the federal government. In states that require a detector, there are differences in the requirements, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). For example, North Carolina and Alaska require carbon monoxide alarms and place responsibilities for their upkeep and replacement with both the property owner and the resident. Virginia prohibits the removal of detectors by tenants. Illinois requires a detector within 15 feet of every sleeping room, while Massachusetts and Minnesota

change the time on your clocks each spring and fall. If a detector sounds, advise residents to leave immediately and call 911.

- Advising residents to seek prompt medical attention if they suspect CO poisoning and are feeling dizzy, light-headed, or nauseous.
- Insisting that residents NOT use a generator, charcoal grill, camp stove, or other gasoline or charcoal-burning device inside their unit or outside near a window.
- Venting stoves and fireplaces.
- Advising residents NOT to heat their units with a gas oven. **NU**



First Post-College Job Leads to 25-Year Career

NAME: Connie Buza, NAHP-e

MANAGEMENT COMPANY: Action Housing, Inc., Pittsburgh, Pa.

POSITION: Senior Property Manager

YEAR OF CERTIFICATION: 2013

Connie Buza was a 21-year-old graduate of Robert Morris College in Pittsburgh when she took a position as a part-time secretary at Developac, a property-management company. “Six months later I was full-time, and 25 years later, here I am,” she said.

She moved up to become

the manager of a 102-unit property in Somerset County, Pa. that served the elderly, and she stayed in that position for 18 years. She liked working with the elderly and providing them with a good place to live. “You have to develop relationships with them work with them to figure out exactly what their needs are,” she said. “We didn’t have a service coordinator at the time, so I was a manager wearing many hats.”

Developac was bought by Action Housing, Inc. in 2001. In 2007 Connie was promoted to senior property manager. She now supervises five managers of 18 buildings totaling nearly 600 units.

Action Housing has a diverse portfolio that includes Sections 8, PRAC 202 and 811-subsidized properties, and develops/manages tax credit properties.

What she finds challenging about her position is being responsible for assuring compliance with HUD, IRS and other regulations. She works with her property managers to have them understand the regs and fill out reports properly, and then she reviews and submits needed documentation.

Fortunately, this and other challenges have been made easier by training Connie received through Western Pennsylvania AHMA

(PAHMA), NAHMA and others. Eventually she joined PAHMA’s board, and is now on her second year as its vice president. She co-chairs PAHMA’s annual fall conference, which this year had 400 attendees.

Connie is the mother of two girls, ages 14 and 11, and is “a true soccer mom.”

“When I’m not working, soccer pretty much takes over my life.”

What’s necessary to be a good property manager? “Be a caring person, someone who wants to help,” Connie said. “We are providing people with housing, a main staple in life. You have to care if you’re going to do well.” **NU**

PROTECTING THE INTERESTS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROPERTY MANAGERS AND OWNERS

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