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A property manager's guide to investigating accidents: Steps to take after the incident

April 30, 2008 - Owners Developers & Managers

Whenever an accident occurs, the property manager's first priority is to deal with the emergency and ensure that any injuries receive prompt medical attention. The accident investigation should begin immediately thereafter.

Immediacy is important because delay can make it difficult to conduct a complete and truthful investigation. Involved witnesses and claimants can quickly forget or alter facts - often unintentionally - as they begin to think about the incident. Maintenance workers can remove valuable clues which are necessary to the investigation process. Witnesses standing around after an incident often compare observations, and unintentionally influence each other. Therefore, it is essential to begin investigating the incident as soon as possible.

Reasons for Accident/Incident Investigation

As a rule, there are many positive reasons for conducting an incident investigation, and when performed properly, the results can provide important information to help prevent future incidents.

Accident patterns repeat themselves unless something is done to break the pattern. Minor injuries, as well as accidents with no injury, serve as a warning that something is wrong and must be corrected. The accident investigation will reveal causes that can be corrected.

The most important reason to investigate accidents is to avoid future injuries from occurring.

A thorough incident investigation will:

- *Show concern for the injured party and limit potential of attorney involvement
- *Identify the root causes of incidents
- *Identify methods to prevent repeat incidents
- *Provide information to make safety recommendations
- *Identify and eliminate workplace hazards
- *Correct unsafe conditions
- *Aid in crisis planning
- *Address liability issues

Who Should Investigate

The property manager is the best-qualified person to conduct the investigation. Why? Because of the very nature of the job, they know the property, tenants, and subcontractors at the property. The property manager's involvement can help promote better relations with the tenants by demonstrating concern for their safety. Most importantly, in most situations, the Property Manager can take corrective action to prevent further incidents.

When responding to an incident scene, it is important that the property manager take control of the situation in a courteous professional manner.

- *Do not argue the cause of the incident.

*Do not blame any individual at the scene.

*Do not accept any blame at the scene.

Accident Investigation Approach

During the investigation, the property manager must maintain their objectivity. The purpose of the investigation is to find the cause of the accident, not to assign blame.

Discuss the accident with the injured person, but only after first aid or medical treatment is given. Talk with any witnesses to the accident and those familiar with conditions immediately before and after it occurred. Sometimes the information provided by the witness who didn't see the accident at all, but was there either before or after the event occurred, is the best witness of all.

If serious personal injury or major property damage has occurred, the incident investigation may require taking measurements and/or photographs. This is done in order to verify, by documentation, the incident scene in case of court action. The property manager should be certain to write their name, date and time the photograph was taken on the back of the photograph in the event they are no longer working for the company when and if the case is litigated.

What to do With the Results

Property Managers should take action to control or eliminate the conditions that caused the accident once these have been conclusively identified. When an area can be changed to eliminate the hazard, property managers should make the change if it is within their authority, or seek necessary approval from management.

Documentation of all information gathered is paramount. The property manager should record their analysis on an accident investigation form and report their findings to the insurance company immediately.

The Best Advice

Preventing accidents and injuries is the single most effective way to control claim costs. An accident that never happens is the cheapest claim there is! Training property managers on pre and post loss activities will serve to reduce claim costs and also to minimize the frequency and severity of accidents that do inevitably occur.

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