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Best practices for managing during a crisis - by Tim Curran

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Emergency situations – whether they are sudden like a fire or continually developing crises like the COVID-19 outbreak – necessitate efficient responses from property owners and operators, and require established plans. The ability to execute on these depends on the proactive installment of appropriate emergency tools and protocols. While every situation is different in scope and severity, here are some best practices office building owners and operators should consistently adopt during crises to protect both their occupants' and properties' wellbeing.

Communicate Clearly, Proactively and Often

In times of chaos and uncertainty, it's a property manager's responsibility to provide occupants with direct guidance regarding how their spaces will be impacted. This includes sharing updates on everything from safety protocols to building closures so that occupants can plan and respond accordingly. It's important that operators communicate messages proactively. But, of equal importance is that all communication is well thought out and getting to the right people so false information isn't shared, and owners and operators can get ahead of panic and rumors that may worsen the situation. Additionally, operators need to continue communicating throughout the duration of the crisis so that occupants feel supported and assured their landlords and property managers are prepared to tackle worst-case scenarios. To this end, overcommunication in a purposeful way is not to be feared.

Because there may be little time to act when crisis strikes, operators need to have their communications systems – including predetermined distribution lists – established in advance so that they can easily deploy messages across the channels that will most effectively reach their occupants. By eliminating time spent worrying over who to contact and how to reach them during an emergency, management teams can focus on the remaining tasks of their emergency response plans.

Keep Up with Preventative Maintenance

In order to mitigate risk of further complications that could distract from the overarching situation, property managers need to maintain operational excellence in the wake of building disruptions. Even in emergency scenarios that result in occupants working remotely, most office buildings are not completely shut down, and so property managers need to be vigilant in keeping buildings clean and functioning, and the people who do enter the building safe. To this end, buildings and their equipment – such as security systems, elevators and HVAC systems – need to receive continuous, preventive maintenance so that they remain up to standard. For example, as part of its COVID-19 stay-at-home advisory, the Massachusetts government distinguished workers who ensure the continuity of building functions as essential – even though some of the businesses they service may be closed due to their non-essential status. This underscores the importance of such maintenance.

To achieve this level of upkeep – especially during times of increased stress – property managers should be keeping meticulous records of maintenance work. Whereas paper records can quickly become disorganized, a digital tracking system allows for detailed status updates ranging from

overall property performance to individual workorders, and visibility across the team. Having an easily accessible system in place makes identifying and fulfilling maintenance needs that much easier later.

Adapt Response Plans as Crises Evolve

Emergency circumstances can change rapidly, and property managers need to be prepared and able to adapt their emergency response plans to meet evolving needs. Flexibility is critical for seamless execution of operational continuity. Staff availability as well as occupants' ability to uphold lease terms may fluctuate, but having tools that can anticipate these changes allows owners and operators to maintain order within their properties while maximizing available resources to continuously meet occupant expectations.

Buildings, and the offices and spaces they host, are communal by nature – even with a decreased physical workforce – so it's critical that owners and operators act as responsible stewards of the space in times of emergency and crisis, and beyond. When scenarios become chaotic, effective property management depends on having the proper systems in place that allow operators to efficiently execute communications and emergency response plans to assure the wellbeing of occupants and buildings alike.

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