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The resident services lifeline - by Kate Swope

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Even in the best of times, a strong and effective resident services program is the key to stable tenancy occupancy for rental communities. As this past year and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have been anything but the best of times, the role of resident services has proven critical – and quite possibly a matter of life and death. As a property manager, it's vital to provide services that are not only needed, but can be easily engaged with by residents. It's important not to overlook the small things, but to reach out whenever and however possible. A creative and flexible approach can position a resident services department for success.

Weekly wellness calls are a great place to start. Geared toward seniors and vulnerable residents, this outreach can be made by site teams to provide a personal connection to residents that may already be at risk of isolation. Additionally, following through on a weekly check-in might shed light on early warning signs of a resident in need, allowing staff members to provide services, referrals, or interventions before the situation escalates.

Compiling a resident resource guide is another great service. In addition to housing and community resources, be sure to include information on health and medical services, food assistance, financial services, social isolation tools, emergency services, and the latest COVID info. Rental assistance support is one example – having a place to call home is now more than ever a safety issue. Ensuring residents have enough food, connecting them with schools if their children qualify for free lunch, and making sure their homes are safe environments (especially now that they're spending so much time there) are also important efforts that can be augmented through a resident resource guide. This guide works best if its initially offered as a hard copy document, with duplication and frequent updating on the community's website. Weekly newsletters are another way to stay connected with reminders of services available but more focus on lighter updates, like photos from recent events or birthday greetings.

Virtual video-based and phone-based programming goes a long way toward communicating

important information while also providing a more personal interaction. Technologies including Zoom, Facetime, WhatsApp, and others offer a familiar face, a warm smile, and everything from wellness education programs and technology access and support to poetry groups, bingo, coffee hours, exercise, painting and games like Trivial Pursuit or Jeopardy! Residents can be social with staff members and their neighbors, and these virtual events can help make up for a loss of programming that many residents would otherwise physically engage in.

Resident service programming can also encompass creative “at home together” programming. These types of events usually involve some type of hybrid in-person and virtual elements, and can include anything from weekly food banks and flu shot clinics to scavenger hunts or an outdoor music series. Activities centered around seasons and holidays work great for this type of programming too – distributing wreath or gingerbread house decorating kits, for example, or a pumpkin “Guess My Weight” contest. This category is also great for modified versions of annual events residents look forward to; instead of the usual end-of-summer barbecue, for example, a communal virtual event with in-person delivery by staff members of barbecue favorites in a boxed lunch can still be a surprisingly important celebration.

Offering a robust variety of resident services is a win-win for everyone involved. Core programming like some of the strategies offered above, especially in such uncertain and restrictive times as now, helps to connect residents and staff, residents with each other and with community resources. An ongoing program of varying efforts strengthens these connections, which in turn provides emotional support and reduces isolation. Additionally, occupancy levels are stabilized, providing further security to residents as well as some steadiness to property managers and owners.

We will not always live in pandemic times, but perhaps this past year has shown us the value of a multi-layered resident services program, and the good it can do for residents in the worst of times, and in the best of times as well.

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