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IREM president's message: Prepare properties for extreme cold

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Managing real estate is filled with tough choices and unexpected situations. It is what makes the industry challenging and each day different. This was epitomized by the weather events in early February. Unlike other storms with inches or even feet of snow, this was a different type of storm where the region saw wild chills reach -30° and then quickly warm to 50° the very next day.

That weather is the perfect combination to wreak havoc on buildings and cause pipes to freeze and then quickly thaw and burst. Buildings throughout New England incurred millions in damage as a result, and while we can't change the past, we would be foolish not to learn from it. After speaking with industry experts in disaster preparedness and preventative maintenance, here are a few lessons learned from a very hard stretch for many property owners and management teams:

Preparation starts before the storm: As with snowstorms, if you are only reacting when the storm is bearing down on you, it is often too late. Here are a few things that communities should be doing in the fall, before the winter season starts:

- Insulate Pipes - Especially those close to outside walls, attics, or crawl spaces. The more insulation you use, the better protected your pipes will be.
- Wrap Pipes - With heat tape or thermostatically controlled heat cables. Use products approved by an independent testing organization. Closely follow manufacturer installation and operation instructions.
- Seal Air Leaks - Look for air leaks around electrical wiring, dryer vents and pipes. Use caulk or insulation. Check weather stripping and other sealants around exterior doors.
- Disconnect Outdoor Hoses - Turn off water to exterior faucets and sprinkler systems, drain and winterize. Check outside spigots where hoses attach and drain.
- Identify The Locations of Shutoff Valves - Prepare to stop the flow of water as soon as possible when a pipe bursts.

Even after the best preparation in the fall, there are still subsequent things you can do in the final days and hours to give your community a better chance of avoiding serious water intrusion events during the extreme cold.

Educate The Members of Your Community - Do outreach to residents and remind them if they are away from home to make sure their windows are all closed and thermostat is set to the proper temp.

Keep Exterior Doors Closed - Doors propped open, even for a few minutes, can quickly freeze any exposed water supply lines.

Raise Thermostats in Vestibules - This will act as a cushion between exterior elements and interior.

Open Interior Doors and Vanity Doors within a Unit – This will help circulate heat throughout all areas including unheated areas with uninsulated pipes.

Turn On Both Hot and Cold Faucets Near Outside Walls - Allow a small trickle of water to run during the night.

Have Emergency Contacts Readily Available - Include a backup remediation company because in area-wide events, demand will be extremely high.

Equipment Prep – Make sure all in-house water cleanup equipment is serviced and in a known location, including extension cords and surge protectors.

Plan for back up staff to act as support or key holders.

Finally, make sure the on-site staff are walking areas frequently so that water intrusion events can be identified and addressed immediately. This includes walking all vacant units to check that thermostats are between 68 and 70 degrees and that base cabinet doors are left open for heat to circulate to exposed or uninsulated pipes. Walk all stairwells and confirm heaters are working. Walk all exterior sprinkler rooms and confirm heaters are on. Make sure to re-walk these areas for up to three days after to ensure the warming does not cause delayed leaks as pipes thaw.

This preparation takes effort to complete, but it is time well spent knowing that a qualified preventative maintenance program can save headaches for you and your staff and save the property owners millions in damages.

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William Woodward is the 2023 IREM Boston president and is a regional property manager with Greystar, Boston, Mass.