



## **SPECIAL COVID-19 RISK CONTROL BULLETIN**

### **TIPS FOR VACANT BUILDINGS**

When properties are left vacant or are unoccupied, there are proactive steps that should be taken to help prevent losses due to heating or electrical system malfunctions, water damage, vandalism or other causes.

#### **Heating/Electrical System**

- Before the winter months, hire a contractor to inspect the heating system to ensure it is working properly to reduce any potential for freezing.
- If using LP gas, propane gas or oil heat, check the fuel level in the tank periodically to ensure it does not run out of fuel.
- Check the building regularly (at least once a week) to ensure the heating system is operating properly.
- If the heating system is to remain in service, be sure the electric power is not shut off since this will shut down the heating system. Because the electrical service will remain on, inspect the main electrical panel, wiring and outlets. Repair or replace any defective or deficient items.
- If the building is not to be heated, turn off the fuel at the main shut-off valve to reduce the potential for malfunction and explosion. Check the valve periodically to ensure it is working properly. If the electrical system is to be shut off, it should be shut off at the main circuit breaker and the breaker locked open.
- A chimney service should inspect and clean any chimneys to ensure they are free from obstructions, such as nesting birds. Install chimney guard screen caps to help prevent infestation.

#### **Water Damage**

- If the heating system is a hot water system and is to be turned off completely, drain the plumbing system (or properly winterize it) to prevent damage from freezing.
- If the hot water heating system and/or water pipes will not be drained, install a water flow sensor and low temperature sensor to be monitored by the alarm system. Keep the thermostat at a consistent temperature throughout the winter months.
- If the water will not be turned off insulate the water lines that run along exterior walls so that the water supply will be less likely to freeze. If heat tape is used on piping, follow the manufacturer's instructions closely to prevent fires. Open cabinet doors to allow heat from the

room to get into concealed spaces. Drain and shut off outdoor water faucets to prevent vandalism and freezing damage. In residential structures shut off dishwasher and washing machine hoses to prevent serious water damage losses.

- If a separate hot water heater is present, inspect it for leaks. If the property is in an earthquake-prone area, confirm it is retrofitted properly (e.g., strapped to the adjacent wall).
- Regularly check the insulation, exterior doors and windows and any weather stripping to ensure there are not any major deficiencies present. Water and insects may enter through these openings.
- Regularly inspect the roof for any evidence of damage, leaks, missing or worn roof covering or flashing and replace or repair them to help prevent damage from wind or from water backup from ice that may have formed around the edges.
- Inspect the roof for ice dams after a storm, which can prevent melting snow from draining off the roof. This could potentially cause interior water damage from water backing up.
- Inspect the attic and basement regularly for any evidence of water damage or mold. Fix all leaks, keep appliances clean, and increase ventilation to prevent the growth of molds and bacteria. This also can reduce the potential for insect or rodent infestation.
- Check and clean gutters, downspouts and roof drains in the spring and fall. Clogged gutters and drains can result in basement flooding when the snow melts in northern climates and/or water damage to interior walls in any climate as the water is no longer channeled properly. Check the downspouts and extensions to make sure water is diverted away from the building and does not pond next to the foundation.

### **Vandalism**

- Notify the police department that the property will be vacant and provide emergency notification phone numbers to the police.
- Promptly repair any significant hazards (e.g., missing or broken railings, or steps, windows, etc.) to give the appearance the building is regularly occupied.
- Stop or forward mail and newspapers to an appropriate address or have it picked up on a regular basis. Even if all mail is stopped, the building should be checked at least weekly to ensure unread mail, flyers, leaflets, etc., do not build up and add to the vacant/unoccupied appearance of the property.
- Secure external doors and windows with deadbolt locks, security-type hinges and sturdy door frames that cannot be spread apart. Install slide locks or other equivalent security locks on sliding glass doors or French doors in residential type buildings.
- In residential type buildings install variable light timers to increase the appearance the building is regularly occupied and ensure the lights do not turn on and off at the same time every day.
- Install a UL-listed central station burglar alarm system, if one does not already exist, or provide guard service to provide adequate security for large commercial buildings.

### **Miscellaneous**

- Remove dead trees or overhanging large tree limbs from the property that could cause damage.
- In higher wind-exposed or coastal areas, install storm shutters (or other mitigation measures, such as 5/8" marine plywood – remove after the storm) to secure windows ahead of a potentially damaging storm.
- Anchor fuel tanks and other storage tanks.

- Install a UL-listed central station fire alarm system, if one does not already exist. Wireless detection devices can be utilized to ease installation. In single family dwellings install smoke detectors with at least one on every floor. Test the sensors and system regularly. Install carbon monoxide detectors and test them monthly, especially if the building will be shown to prospective buyers periodically.
- Automatic fire protection systems should be left in service. Adequate building heat must be maintained where wet fire protection systems exist. Where dry systems exist power must be maintained for the air compressors, as well as heat for the valve rooms.

*The information provided in this document is intended for use as a guideline and is not intended as, nor does it constitute, legal or professional advice. The information in this document does not constitute a complete and finite list of each and every item or procedure related to the topics or issues referenced herein. Consideration should be given to current law and any specific legal needs that your organization or community may have, as well as to any work rules, contracts, and collective bargaining agreements that may relate to the development and implementation of other policies and forms.*

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