



For most community managers, reduced hours during the Christmas holiday is an opportunity to spend more time with family. HOA board meetings are even canceled. This annual time-off tradition is vulnerable to one dramatic event that can dampen your holiday cheer: severe weather! The intention of this article is to add a sense of ease and comfort for managers, customer service agents and homeowners when braving heavy winter storms.



By Charles Antis

EMERGENCY LEAK PROTOCOL FOR THE COMMUNITY MANAGER

Because of excessive rainfall in December 2010, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a State of Emergency in many Southern California counties. In a land of stucco, flat roofs and garden windows, the record rainfall (14 inches in one week) created more leaks in our HOA communities than ever before. Managers found themselves working day and night to calm agitated homeowners.



To a homeowner, moisture intrusion in their bedrooms and dwelling areas can create the ultimate sense of panic and despair. When they place the call to management representatives, their frustration is apparent and their need for immediate service is at its highest. Fielding calls from agitated and often emotional homeowners requires experience and an arsenal of helpful tips. The following tips may help you refresh your emergency protocol:

Smile, breathe and speak calmly

- » When tension is in the air, take three deep breaths. It will relax you and increase blood flow to your brain.
- » The manner in which you talk to the homeowner will usually influence their peace of mind.
- » Speak slowly, calmly and clearly.
- » It is important to smile. Huh? Yes, you can hear a smile through the phone.

Is it a health-threatening emergency?

In your typical homeowner's perspective, their leak is an emergency. It is therefore helpful for you to gauge the level of emergency in their situation. Calmly asking questions when comforting the homeowner may help indicate emergency status.

- » Life-threatening emergency (no explanation needed)
- » Health-threatening emergency: Although subjective, this category allows the homeowner to assist you in classifying their leak as "bothersome, but maybe not so threatening." Health-threatening emergencies may include flooding of rooms, existence of mold or the perceived threat of roof collapse.



Standard ceiling leak

- » Standard ceiling, wall or window leak: Most leaks allow only a quarter-cup to a couple gallons of water of intrusion. Damage from such leaks can be minimized by the homeowner.

Do you know how to best help the homeowner?

The following suggestions are specifically for the homeowner:

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- » Gently poke a hole in the ceiling where dampness is occurring using a screwdriver or pen. This will mitigate further damage to the ceiling and direct the flow of releasing water.
- » Place towels and buckets or large bowls under the hole to collect water. Dump water as needed.
- » Remove personal belongings to prevent damage to the items.
- » Lift carpeting and place towels at wet walls and on wet windowsills. Replace towels as needed.
- » Turn lights off when leaking occurs at electrical fixtures and allow water to drip out of fixture into bucket. (To many homeowners, leaking at a light fixture feels like an emergency, but electrical fire from rain is not a likely occurrence.) If water is collecting in the fixture bowl, simply remove and dump.
- » Remember, most reports of “collapsed roofing” are not, in fact, roofing or structural concerns but are simply loose, small pieces of drywall that have fallen due to the weight of the water, and it poses no health risk. Every year we receive dozens of calls from panicked homeowners that “their roof is caving in,” only to find a few pieces of acoustical “cottage cheese” on the floor.



Place towels and buckets or large bowls under the hole to collect water.



Lift wet carpeting and place towels at floorboards.



Allow water to drip from light fixtures, but remove the glass bowl to empty trapped water.



Poke a hole in the wet ceiling.



Loose drywall tape and plaster is typically not a serious health risk.

Remember, it is critical to get the water out of the dwelling areas. When leaking is substantial, be sure to include the use of a reputable interior restoration service. Their guidance in water removal, air circulation and cleanup will help prevent substantial property loss.

Do you have pre-approved emergency repair and/or tarping fees established?

The cost for emergency service to the roofs of your communities is substantial. If your vendors are compliant with workers' compensation and liability insurance, it is unlikely that repair or tarping can be facilitated for less than \$450 to \$700. An agreement with the board of directors for a preapproved emergency fee is critical in fulfilling the HOA's due diligence.

The HOA will have time to agree on roof replacement or sectional invasive rebuilding of shell components at future meetings, but emergency services must be completed to mitigate damages to health and property.

What are your vendors' emergency procedures?

Can you imagine going into the ER and not ever speaking to a doctor or if no emergency procedures were implemented by the nurses? Many vendors are not adequately prepared to handle emergency conditions.

- » When states of emergency are declared, constant communication is necessary between the manager and vendor



Air circulating fan for removal of moisture.

to facilitate periods of “triage” or heightened alert.

- » Your best vendors will provide you with instructions during the crisis. They will instruct you on the current state of affairs and will provide you windows of time they will contact the homeowner and facilitate the emergency repair.
- » Your reputable roofing vendor can make the decision while onsite to apply tarping or emergency repair. His course of action will most likely depend on what will provide temporary relief to the homeowner.
- » Although tarping and temporary repairs are no guarantee that the area will not leak again, it is a necessary step until sectional roof replacement can be facilitated.



Emergency tarping.



Door knockers are provided by experienced vendors.

Do you understand what is helpful to provide to your vendors?

- » Make sure to include *all* contact numbers for homeowners. This includes cell, home and work phone numbers, and e-mail. List tenant contact information also if unit is sub-leased.
- » Include manager’s full name and e-mail on the initial work order.
- » Do not submit work orders more than once or in multiple formats (e.g., fax, phone call, e-mail, U.S. mail). Duplicate work orders can cumber the data/information management process, which may affect emergency response time. Checking on the status of a work order can be facilitated via e-mail confirmation after health-threatening emergencies are attended to.
- » Ask the homeowner how many leaks are occurring and exactly which rooms are affected. This information will help your vendor provide a more complete service.
- » Does the unit have a leak history? Accurate reporting of leaking in all rooms may help clarify whether the leak is new or recurring.



Temporary repairs - above and left



Sectional roof replacement



Leak history charting can be provided by reputable vendors.

Effective partnering with your roofing vendors will assist you in providing comfort to your homeowners during severe storms. Service vendors are (or should be) in business to provide a positive experience to our communities and managers. This is only possible when we work together as a team. So relax, breathe and be prepared as the next winter storm approaches.

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