



Tips for Protecting and Preparing Properties and Residents against Swine Flu

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By Erika Schnitzer, Associate Editor

Washington, D.C.—With the World Health Organization raising the worldwide pandemic alert of swine flu to Phase 5, apartment owners and operators need to be aware of the risks of the virus and take certain precautions toward protecting residents and employees.

Experts say that with the growing number of swine flu cases growing, communication is especially crucial. “Even if you have done nothing else, the most important thing is to communicate with staff and residents and provide accurate and clear information, even if that’s pointing them in the direction of resources,” says Eileen Lee, vice president of environment and energy at NMHC.

The Institute of Real Estate Management (IREM) has issued “Preparing for Pandemic Flu: A Real Estate Manager’s Guide to Protecting People, Property and Assets” to address the likely effects of such a global crisis on the real estate industry, as well as to educate the industry on strategies to manage pandemic-related risks and minimize their impact.

Awareness is particularly critical, says Lori Burger, CPM, IREM senior vice president and senior vice president of Eugene Burger Management Corp., which manages multifamily communities throughout Nevada and Calif. Burger tells MHN that she is currently monitoring the CDC (Center for Disease Control)’s Website to keep employees aware of updates.

“I’ve heard people say we are taking this too far. I don’t believe it—I think that the difference is that we are so fortunate to have the global network of social networking that advises us of how fast it is spreading,” Burger asserts. “You can stick your head in the sand, and before you know it you can have a situation in your office or community.”

Kaplan Management, which owns and operates multifamily communities throughout the South, including Texas and Fla., has notified its residents and employees about the situation. “We’ve urged our employees to stay home if they or their family members are feeling ill, and we’ve communicated to our residents that they need to use caution in public and be mindful of others around them,” says Matt Summers, president of Kaplan Management. “

Burger also suggests networking with other property managers in your neighborhood, even if they are your competitor, so that if a situation does arise in your community, you can transfer phones to another property without losing business. “You have to be good neighbors,” she says.

The IREM publication addresses such topics as the possibility of a pandemic, how seasonal flu differs from pandemic flu, creating hygiene protocols, stockpiling protective equipment, and establishing quarantine procedures, updating HR policies, travel rules and telecommuting guidelines, enhancing communications with employees, clients and client customers and creating lease policies that address business interruptions and contractual defaults.

“The first step in situations such as this is for everyone to be more aware of protective hygiene,” says Peter Lehr, director of management at Kaled Management Corp, which owns and manages apartment communities throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. “With that in mind, Kaled has instructed its employees to twice daily spray a disinfectant on all common area door handles and knobs and to spray Lysol into the elevator cabs.”

In addition, NMHC has brought its Pandemic Flu Resource Center to the front page of its site to remind apartment companies of the importance of having an emergency preparedness plan to deal with pandemic flu situations, as well as other emergencies.

“In this moment in time, the situation is changing extremely quickly, far faster than even the CDC envisioned. NMHC continues to be involved in the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) critical infrastructure group so we are on periodic conference calls with CDC and DHS to discuss these ideas, and we have launched a listserv for NMHC members so they can share experiences, ask questions and get feedback from their peers,” says Lee.

In addition, Kaled Management Corp. has encouraged employees to “use rubber gloves while handling the trash and to thoroughly wash their hands at the conclusion of that task. We have also informed them to wear rubber gloves and mask while working in apartments if they think that it is called for. Obviously, they should thoroughly wash their hands when they exit an apartment,” says Lehr.

Because the virus is being dealt with at the state and local levels, Lee notes, “you need to follow what’s going on at the local community level so you know what to be telling your residents.”

She adds, “It’s really important to have a plan in place because we see time and time again whether it’s a weather disaster or a fire, disaster planning is as crucial as the resolution.”

The following are some steps to take at your apartment communities:

1. Communicate with your residents, providing them with resources if they have questions and concerns.
2. Thoroughly clean common areas, and disinfect them more regularly than usual. Consider temporarily closing some common areas if anyone in the community has symptoms.
3. Install hand sanitizers in common areas such as elevator lobbies, fitness centers and laundry rooms.
4. Ensure you have all residents’ and employees’ contact information.
5. Set up a centralized phone number or social networking group where residents and employees can get the most up-to-date information on their community.
6. Consider temporarily closing the on-site office and direct calls to another location.
7. Determine the best way to work with your local health authority if you have a gravely ill person on your property. Make sure residents let you know if they need medical assistance; facilitate their getting in touch with authorities if they are unable to do it themselves.