



How secure is your apartment?

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Property management companies and individual landlords take many precautions to ensure the safety of their residents. To maximize security, residents need to take it upon themselves to be vigilant at all times.

Management measures

Property management companies do everything that they can to ensure their residents' safety, including installing electronic monitoring systems. Burton Carol Management, which operates 14 apartment complexes in Ohio, has installed keyless entry systems at many of its properties, particularly its high rises, said Joy Anzalone, the company's chief operating officer.

Upon moving into a Burton Carol building that has a keyless entry system, residents are issued a key fob that is coded to unlock the door to their unit and common areas, such as the lobby doors and fitness center.

The resident swipes the key fob past a sensor to access the front door to the apartment community. Each time a resident swipes the key fob, the building's computer system logs the time and place where it was used.

When residents move out of the building, the fobs are deactivated and no longer open doors.

Burton Carol has also installed keyless entry systems in its clubhouses. The exercise room at Crossings Village in Westlake is located in the clubhouse, which residents can access 24/7 to work out.

Water Street Apartments in downtown Cleveland has a key fob system on all of its exterior doors, the weight room, and the rooftop deck.

"Someone who doesn't live here cannot enter the building," said property manager Sandra Truesdale.

Burton Carol has also installed digital cameras in the common areas of many of its apartment buildings, including the entrances, lobbies, driveways, and exercise rooms. Some buildings also have digital cameras on the floors. The cameras are unobtrusive, but the residents know they are there.

"Cameras make the residents feel very comfortable," said Anzalone.

"Certain parts of our premises are under video surveillance," she added. Signs are posted that state, "Video surveillance in use on these premises." The video cameras are small, and the residents take comfort in knowing that they are there.

Onsite property manager

Having a good property manager or maintenance person who know the residents and lives onsite also helps ensure



that tenants feel more comfortable, said Anzalone. Residents feel better knowing that a representative of the management company is on the premises at all times and just a phone call away.

A good property manager who knows the residents will notice when they don't follow their customary routines. Property managers will also know when someone that they do not recognize comes into the building

Resident responsibilities

"Burton Carol does everything a professional property management company can do to ensure its residents' safety," Anzalone said, "but residents also have to take personal responsibility for their own safety."

The company encourages residents to report anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or seems out of the ordinary to the property manager and the police department.

"Our buildings have many long-time residents who have a good sense of what is right and when something is wrong. Watchful residents are valuable assets," she said.

"Crime has no address," she added. Even with multiple security measures in place, every renter needs to be aware of his or her surroundings and be extra vigilant when entering or leaving an apartment.

People in downtown Cleveland can call the Downtown Cleveland Alliance to ask that someone walk them to their building, said Truesdale. Downtown Cleveland Alliance participants patrol the streets on bicycles and are available on a moment's notice.

The Shaker Heights Police Department Crime Prevention Unit has compiled a list of security tips for apartment dwellers, several of which are listed in the sidebar. Call officer Gerald Jankowski at (216) 491-1230 for a copy.

Qualifying residents

Most management companies use a screening service to check a potential renter's background. Renters at Water Street Apartments, for example, have their prior rental history, credit, criminal background, and employment history checked.

Some management companies give special consideration to renters who may have had past issues that were minor occurrences.

"Something like a minor misdemeanor from 25 years ago would not get in the way" of a resident's application, said Anzalone.

Winwood Properties in Lakewood uses a resident screening service that provides a pass/fail rating.

"We don't focus on the specifics, but instead look at the whole person," said property manager Martin Davidson.

If an unauthorized person is found living in an apartment after a resident has already signed a lease and moved in, Burton Carol asks the new person to also sign the lease. A background check is done to ensure that that the person meets the property's tenant guidelines.

"If the person turns out to have an undesirable record, we ask the person to move out," she said. "The resident is given 30 days to cure the situation. If the resident does not comply, then we move forward on our rights as stated in the lease agreement. We wouldn't let anybody stay if we knew that they had a record."

Some communities also run background checks and drug screening on their employees.

Choose apartments wisely

Residents should be careful in their selection of an apartment, advised Anzalone.

"Be sure that the building is run by a professional property management company that has the knowledge, resources, and experience to operate a building well."

If you sense that something is amiss with the building management when you look at an apartment, don't rent there. Trust your intuition and look elsewhere until you find an apartment that feels right.

Review the property management company's website before you go to look at an apartment. Do an online search to check whether the company has ever filed for bankruptcy or had liens filed against it.

Another way to learn more about a management company or a building is to check online. Renters rate apartment complexes at www.apartmentratings.com. You'll find information on a property's grounds, noise level, parking, safety, maintenance, construction, and office staff.

If safety is of particular interest to you, look for buildings that have a safety rating of five on a scale of one to five. Also look at when the rating was filled out. If it was many years ago, management could have changed since then. Residents who live in smaller apartment buildings that do not have the level of electronic security equipment of larger facilities need to take extra safety precautions. That includes:

- Always locking your apartment doors.
- Locking the doors to your car.
- Securing windows before you leave your apartment.
- Not opening your door if you do not know who is there.
- Not leaving notes on the door saying that you are out.
- Installing a timer that will turn on lights at night.
- Stopping your mail and newspaper deliveries when leaving for vacation.
- Not leaving a message on your voicemail or answering machine that you are out of town until a particular date.
- Avoiding using the laundry or exercise rooms late at night.
- Reporting anything that seems suspicious to the property manager and police.

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