

## **Apartment Security Use of Security Guards**

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### **Courtesy Officer vs. Security Guard**

Is there a difference between a uniformed security guard and a courtesy officer on an apartment property? The name obviously...but their function is often identical. It seems that some apartment managers believe that calling a uniformed security guard a "courtesy officer" somehow reduces their exposure to civil liability. This belief can't be farther from the truth. The old saying applies here. "If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and walks like a duck...it's probably a duck." Call them what you will, but know that it's the security guard uniform and conduct that will define their true job function.

In practical terms, the primary difference between the two is that the contract security guard is employed by the contractor and not by you. The in-house courtesy officer is an employee of the property management company and usually lives on the premises. The courtesy officer may not be in traditional uniform and may only wear a logo shirt. There are advantages and disadvantages of both types. The biggest advantage of a courtesy officer over the contract worker is the ability to have them live on-site and get to know the property and residents better. Most carry a pager and can respond quickly. Many courtesy officers offer superior service and become very loyal to the property they protect.

Many courtesy officers are off-duty police officers, and with them come superior training and experience. However, don't assume that off-duty police officers know how to provide adequate security to an apartment property. Apartment security isn't taught at the police academy. Also, remember that off-duty police officers may be tired and may not want to wear another uniform or do a lot of foot patrol. However, many courtesy officers are mere civilians and can have the disadvantage of a lack of professional security or police training. Obviously, the training problem can be overcome with a little effort.

### **Background Checks**

Another issue is one of background screening. Most uniformed contract security officers should have been screened at some level. Off-duty police officers, presumably, should have already been screened before being hired by their municipality. At minimum, job references and a basic criminal background should be checked on contract officers and non-police courtesy officers. You must inquire about this and require it of the guard company, in writing, as part of your contract to afford yourself greater liability protection.

If courtesy officers live on site, they should be qualified like any other resident including having verifiable job references and no felony criminal convictions. Yes, ex-felons need jobs too, but not working a security job at a residential property...too much liability. Most "good" applicants will have solid identifiable references, most "bad" applicants will not. **Don't hire "bad" security applicants.** The bottom line is: if you going to issue unit keys or master keys to a security guard or courtesy officer you better feel comfortable with them.

How to accurately check job references and criminal backgrounds is a constant source of complaint from property managers. It's not difficult, but access varies depending on

where you live. The solution is to try, and to make a good faith effort. AOA has a great criminal background check at a reasonable rate.

### **Contract Security Guard Service**

The question that I'm most often asked is, "How do I find a quality contract security guard service for a reasonable price that will perform the patrols responsibly?" To answer this question you must first accept certain facts as being true.

Accept the fact that the words "quality and reasonable price" are often contradictory terms. Accept the fact that paying the highest or lowest price for a contract security patrol officer doesn't always equate to the quality of service, although there are exceptions.

Accept the fact that all contract security agencies are drawn from the same labor pool for potential employees. If your market area has high employment the security guard labor pool may be substandard. In fact, many "poor" security officers will drift between contract agencies until they exhaust the supply of employers. Security guards are often transient and this is the first job they find after hitting town. Because of this fact, it can become a kind of a crapshoot sometimes as the contract agency sends a different security officer to patrol your property each night

### **So what's the Solution?**

As a rule of thumb, you can increase your options and success if you select a larger, established contract agency over a smaller one. A larger agency can usually replace no-shows or unacceptable officers, even at the last minute, because they have a larger pool of employees. Also, larger agencies tend to retain officers longer because they can offer better training and supervision, more benefits, and can provide a defined career path. This doesn't guarantee success however, you still need to accept or reject poor quality security guards when it becomes apparent that they are not meeting the challenge.

You can drastically improve your success potential by setting up strict patrol compliance standards as part of the written contract. These are usually called "post-orders." Post orders should be detailed and always in writing. They are given to each officer as the basis for how they are to service your property. Any breach of the post-orders could be grounds for not paying for the defective service, for replacing the officers, or for replacing the contract security agency. Long-term courtesy officers usually don't require post-orders but more of a detailed job description.

Specific post-orders might include, for example, a set time requirement for patrol such as one-hour of foot patrol, three times per night, and between 8:00 PM and 4:00 AM. You should require that the security officers patrol all areas of the property and to document their patrol pattern in detail. This can be done either with written activity logs or with the use of a watchman's clock or similar device. Don't accept activity logs that merely state, "10:00 PM or 11:00 PM – all quiet." A proper activity log might state, "10:06 PM – Completed patrol of the south parking lot, one light burned out over parking space #256 or "10:14 PM – Checked the mail room, pool gate, laundry room, and bathroom door locks. All were secure."

Drive-through security patrols can be a waste of money if the security officer never stops or gets out of the car. Drive-through accounts rely on high visibility and therefore must spend time on a property to be really effective. Some contract security agencies will overbook drive-through accounts and thereby create a schedule that is impossible for the

patrol officer to maintain. Because of this, some properties might get skipped altogether or receive only a high-speed pass through their property.

**Here are some basic rules to follow to maximize contract security guard productivity:**

- Always read the fine print on the contract. You may be signing an indemnity clause in favor of the contract guard agency.
- Always ask for a copy of their guard company license, and evidence of insurance coverage.
- Request to be named as an "additionally insured" on their policy and indemnity from their negligent acts.
- Always attach the detailed post-orders and patrol instructions as a contract addendum.
- Always require that detailed written activity logs be submitted following the last patrol. Read them, act upon them, and file them for at least two years. Do not accept or pay for incomplete service.
- Always require, in writing, that the security guard agency properly equip their officers with a full uniform, a hand-held radio or cell phone, a notebook and pen, a flashlight, and a vehicle if necessary.
- Always require, in writing, that the contract agency will provide necessary background screening, and all training that is suitable for the site to be patrolled.
- Always supply the security guards with an emergency call list and telephone access.
- Always notify the residents how to the contact security guards when needed.
- Communicate often with the security guard supervisors to get higher quality and service.
- Do not settle or pay for poor performance or inappropriate behavior.

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