

Streamlining the Service Request Process by Mindy Williams

Most apartment residents know exactly what to do when the fuse blows and shuts down the laundry. Or the lawn grass starts to reach their knees. They call the property owner or the rental management firm to take care of the maintenance situation.

Maintenance service is a major reason residents choose to live in apartment homes. And that's why rental housing managers need to stay on top of trends that speed service requests. They also need to encourage residents to report problems early -- before they turn into costly repairs.

There are a number of ways managers can provide better service, reduce the time to complete repairs to the renter's satisfaction and catch a possibly expensive situation in the early stages. These are actual cases used by property managers from around the country.

Twenty-Four Hour Service Requests

Many management companies are installing systems that enable residents to report problems and make service requests by phone or via the Web around the clock.

The main reason to do this? Because property owners and managers usually can reduce the number of renters who move out if they can increase customer satisfaction by delivering better service. Make sure your residents have a variety of ways to report their service requests. These include phone, fax, mail, in person and the Internet.

"Service Six Days a Week" Program

On a rotating schedule, service techs are on call six days a week, Monday through Saturday. The technicians work six days in a row and then have a four-day weekend.

There are a couple of things the service techs like about the arrangement. One, they get a four-day weekend. And Mondays are no longer crazy with piled up work since they have an extra day -- Saturdays -- to handle requests.

This manager uses part-time service techs to help fill any holes in the schedule. Using part-timers, instead of hiring a new full-time employee, saves the company money.

Free Rent Motivation

A manager in Chicago offers residents a day of free rent if their service requests have not been completed within 48 hours. She says this guarantee encourages residents to report problems early, and it motivates service techs to fill requests promptly. Service techs know the company will lose money if they don't get their jobs done, so free rent is rarely given to residents.

Most problems now are caught in the early stages before major damage is done - and that offsets the cost of the infrequent free rent given to residents.

Prompt attention to service requests also:

- Means less work when apartments become available
- Helps with preventive maintenance as other problems are caught earlier
- Reduces overtime for techs as their workloads are steadier -- not crammed into the first and last weeks of the month.

Weekly Door Hangers

How about this idea from another manager in Chicago? She hangs service request forms on residents' doors each week. Every member of her rental office is assigned an area to distribute the door hangers. This gives staff members a good chance to walk the property and report burned out light bulbs, etc. as well as be visible to residents.

When asked if the weekly door hangers bother residents, the manager replied with an emphatic, "No." She added, "We tell residents we do it to take care of them. This shows, on a weekly basis, that we want their homes to be perfect."

In Dallas, a property manager has her employees phone residents monthly to make sure everything is okay. They also solicit for service requests.

Reevaluate Your Service System Before Spring

"It can be a pain," she said, "But our turnover has decreased since we are talking to every resident each month. We also have saved money as we catch service problems early. It has definitely been worth it."

Since most residents move between Memorial Day and Labor Day, start now to streamline the way you handle service requests. Any preventive steps you take today will save you time getting your rental ready for a new resident. This could mean the difference of a few days rent.

So if you prepare the apartment faster, you can move the new resident in earlier - which means less rent lost and more money collected. It's worth speedy service responses.

Mindy Williams is president of Rent & Retain Magazine which has improved the marketing and retention strategies for thousands of management professionals in all 50 states and Canada. Mindy has quickly become our industry's foremost expert on resident retention. Mindy has also published a number of books. To see a list of her books or sign up to receive a monthly copy of the Rent & Retain Magazine, visit her website at www.rentandretain.com.