

Rental Watch

Dear AOA:

I own and manage a 9-unit apartment building and each unit has its own water heater. My tenant called about not getting hot water. I checked and found the pilot was off. I re-lit the pilot and after a few attempts, it stayed on and the water heater fired up. But the heater had the same problem a day or two later. We repeated the procedure, but the heater died again. I've checked all around the heater, no condensation, no rusting pipe, but I could hear gurgling noises coming from within the heater. I guess they could be sediments sitting at the bottom. Now, what can I do to fix this problem, so that it doesn't happen again? S.W.

For answers to this question and the ones that follow, we turned to licensed contractor and maintenance specialist Jerry L'Ecuyre. AOA

Dear S.W.:

The water heater's thermocouple may need to be replaced. That is the copper tube coming from the thermostat and going to the pilot flame. The thermocouple is a safety item that will detect a loss of flame and it will then turn off the gas to the burner. Chances are the thermocouple is not operating properly and it is going into a fail-safe mode and turning off the gas.

It is an easy repair. The thermocouple can be found at any hardware store for under \$10. To replace the thermocouple, unscrew the copper tube from the thermostat and remove the other end from the pilot flame area. Reverse this procedure for the installation.

The bubbling noise you heard inside the tank as it is heating is caused by a calcium build-up at the bottom of the tank. Small 30 or 40-gallon tanks typically do not have a clean-out port. This is a sign that the tank is nearing the end of its useful life. You should start thinking about replacing it in the near future.

Dear AOA:

I am an apartment owner and a member of the Apartment Owners Association. Currently, I'm looking for a handyman or contractor to do work at my building. How could I go about finding pre-screened trade people? Also, what sort of background checks should I do before allowing a workman on my property? I'm concerned about my residents' safety and my property liability. D.P.

Dear D.P.:

This is a very good question. Many of us just take for granted that the people working at our buildings are exactly who they say they are and have our best interests at heart. And most do. But you want to do your due diligence to protect yourself and your residents. The best place to start your search for any trades people is in your Apartment Owners Association News magazine. And now to make your dues more than pay for themselves, call AOA and ask their opinion. Chances are they will know the good from the bad.

Typical information you may want to request from a potential trade person or company: California contractors license, proof of workman's comp Insurance, proof of liability Insurance, a reference list with phone numbers and addresses of several recent jobs and a list of trade associations to which they belong.

A legitimate trades person or company would not be afraid to show you any of the above information. The apartment industry is a small world and we all live or die on our reputations. So ask as many questions you like, and if you don't like the answers, use a different vendor.

Dear AOA:

I own a vintage apartment building in a trendy part of town. I want to gussy up the units by adding crown molding around the ceiling edges. I purchased a compound miter saw and a book on how to do it. In my zeal to master the installation of crown molding, I have managed to cut a 12-foot piece of expensive molding into very small useless pieces. I am about to pull out what is left of my hair. The book says it is easy, but my head is about to explode. Please Help! P.D.

Dear P.D.:

We know what you mean, anyone who has installed crown molding, knows the frustration. But it need not be! Crown molding truly is easy, yes, I said easy. Throw the book away, it only serves to show how smart the author is, but it is of no help to you and me.

First things first. For an inside corner, cut two 12-inch pieces of molding to use as a sample. Place that sample up on the wall and ceiling for a visual. Now bring that sample to your saw and lay it to the left of the blade, against the vertical fence or backstop. Position the sample exactly in the same orientation or position as it was on the wall/ceiling. (The sample piece will not be flat against the fence, it will stick out just like it does on the wall.). Now position your saw blade in the 45-degree position and left of the center mark. Cut the right side of your sample piece and label it Right Hand Corner Inside.

Now take the second piece of sample molding you cut and position it exactly like the first piece, but to right side of the blade. Put your blade in the 45-degree position, but this time it will be to the right of the center mark. Cut and label this piece Left Hand Corner Inside. Test your samples in a corner.

For outside right hand corners set the blade at the 45-degree position and right of the center mark. Position the sample to the left of the blade. Cut and label Right Hand Corner Outside.

For an outside left-hand corner, set the blade at the 45-degree position and left of the center mark. Position the sample to the right of the blade. After the cut, label the sample Left Hand Corner Outside.

The hard part is done; you now have sample cuts to refer to. After measuring the wall, place your measurements on the bottom backside of the molding, the mark will be easier to see on the backside when cutting. Cut a little long at first, and then trim with the saw until the molding fits. And don't forget to repeat to yourself "caulking is my friend!" If the corner is not quite perfect, don't worry, caulk the corners, and the mistakes disappear. Also caulk the top and bottom rails of the molding and it will look like an expert did the installation...Good Luck.

Remember that every property and situation is different so when making building and/or equipment changes, make sure you know your local code compliance laws, uniform building codes and NFPA safety standards. Always consult with a licensed contractor, building inspector and/or related professional if you have a particular problem. If you are in need of a licensed, insured contractor or inspector, you might want to call Contractors Referral service toll free at 1-866-769-7523.