

Winterizing Apartments

By Paul Pesta

What can your tenants do to keep their apartments warm and cozy, and their heating bills down? Although structural changes are the responsibility of the property owner, there are many things renters can do to keep their homes cozy as the cold winds blow through the West Coast. A comfortable cozy apartment retains its renter much longer than a cold, drafty one. Here are some suggestions for little improvements that can add up to a big difference, not only in the gas or electric bill, but to the comfort of the renters, too.

The main culprit in a cold apartment is cold air inflow, and loss of warm air to the outside. Take a tour around the apartment and locate the cold spots. These tend to be around windows and doors, sliding glass doors, electrical outlet covers, and window air conditioners, if there is one. To easily determine where the leaks are, light an incense stick and hold it near a potentially leaky spot in the apartment. If cold air is flowing in, you'll clearly see the smoke blowing in the direction of the cold air infiltration. This gives you an idea of the biggest areas of heat loss, and the areas to work on first.

Once every opening in the building has been tested, count and measure all windows and sliding glass doors. Also, count the number and type of electrical outlets and light switches, especially on exterior walls. If you have an air conditioner, measure its dimensions. At the hardware store, you can buy window insulation kits, outlet insulation kits and air conditioner covers.

Windows are the primary source of heat loss, especially through single pane windows so commonly found in older buildings. The easiest way to stop the loss of warm air is to install a window insulating kit. These can be purchased in various sizes to match your windows, and they come in inside and outside application styles. Follow the instruction installations that come with the kit. The basic steps are to clean the window inside and out, clean the window or doorframe with rubbing alcohol and apply the double faced tape to the entire frame in one continuous piece. (Be sure to leave the backing on one side) Then remove the backing and starting in one corner, apply the plastic film making sure to keep it taut. Then, use a hair dryer to shrink the film to get rid of any wrinkles. When applied properly, these plastic film insulators are invisible, but the difference they make is dramatic. They work by creating a still air pocket between the window and plastic film that acts as a barrier to heat transfer. Be sure to leave some windows open for emergency exit. They are designed to hold through one winter, and then be easily removable when the weather warms up again in the spring.

Insulated curtains or drapes can also be very effective barriers to heat loss and cold air infiltration. A tenant should ask permission of the landlord for any change or addition to existing window coverings, as they are usually part of the apartment fixtures. Installation of any hardware, in particular, should be done only with the full knowledge and permission of the property owner.

Doors can also be a place of significant heat loss. Make sure that the doors are sealed as tightly as possible. Simple foam stick-on weather stripping is easily purchased at any hardware store. When applied around the doorframe where the door and the frame meet, the tighter seal can cut down on drafts considerably.

A sweep can be applied to the bottom of the door to lock out drafts. These should not be installed by tenants without permission of the landlord, however, as they are actually screwed into the bottom of the door. A savvy landlord with access to a good maintenance person might reward the tenant with a door sweep, especially if the tenant shows he has done his part by taking other insulation steps within his apartment.

Even if the apartment front door opens out into a hallway, it can benefit from good weather stripping, as most common hallways are not heated at all, or only minimally heated.

Another approach is to use a "draft dog" at the base of the door. These are usually tubes of fabric filled with sand or dense fabric. These work well, but only if someone is home to put them in place.

Electrical outlets, especially on exterior walls can be a surprising source of drafts. Insulating kits for outlets are available at the hardware store, and very quick and easy to install. Even interior wall outlets can benefit from proper insulation.

The openings around pipes underneath sinks can also be a source of cold air infiltration. Inexpensive, caulk or expanding insulation foam can be applied to seal these openings.

Give the matter of cold air infiltration some attention this winter. Ask your tenants to check all of these areas in their units. A checklist for each of your units shows your tenants that you care about their comfort during the cold winter. For very little expense, you could offer to provide materials, and even installation of these items. When you are responsive to your tenants needs, the tenants reward your responsiveness with greater cooperation and interest in helping you maintain your property.

If your insulation checklist surveys reveal significant any significant problem areas, such as windows or doors that really need to be replaced, you can put this information into your long-term improvement planning and budget.

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. The information contained in this article is not intended as legal advice. Always consult an attorney if you have a particular problem or question.

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. Contractors Referral has been in the business of referring contractors to property owners for over 36 years.