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Here's the Key

When it comes to managing your keys or smart locks, your residents and reputation are at stake.

By **CARL HANLY**, CAS, KeyTrak

Whether your property has implemented a keyless entry system or still uses traditional metal keys, a secure and efficient key control process is a nonnegotiable part of a quality living experience.

To attract residents, multifamily communities are offering creative amenities (recording studios, dog spas, rooftop decks, etc.) and leasing incentives such as a free month of rent. But what do renters really want?

While residents do enjoy luxury, Reputation.com's 2018 Property Management Reputation Report found that one of the top-ranking factors for a good living experience is more practical: security. Over 60 percent of respondents in a Schlage study said they would even move out of an apartment that lacked safety. If someone doesn't feel safe in an apartment, even the most luxurious amenities or the most generous incentives can't make them stay.

This emphasis on security explains why many residents, particularly millennials, look for properties with smart locks. Whether your property has implemented a keyless entry system or still uses traditional metal keys, a secure and efficient key control process is a nonnegotiable part of a quality living experience. Here are three reasons why.

1. Ineffective Key Control Processes Eat up Employees' Time

If there's one thing multifamily employees have an endless supply of, it's time. That's a wildly inaccurate statement, right? Yet if you don't have efficient processes, you're treating your staff's time like a limitless commodity. If they spend an inordinate portion of their day on administrative duties, they have less time to focus on addressing residents' needs.

How much time do your employees spend on tasks related to managing unit access? That could include processes like completing paper key control logs, reprogramming smart lock security tokens (fobs, cards, etc.)

or tracking down keys or security tokens that employees or vendors haven't returned.

The more manual processes you have, the more likely employees are to omit steps and find shortcuts. One property I worked with, for example, programmed master versions of smart key fobs because employees were spending so much time programming fobs to individual units.

This strategy certainly did save time, but the problem was that giving employees access to fobs preprogrammed for all units was like using master keys, which made it easier for employees to abuse their unit access privileges (we'll discuss this issue in more detail below).

Though the property did have electronic logs to see which units had been entered, those logs didn't show who had been in each apartment. Even though employees had more time to focus on residents, the method they chose to increase efficiency put those same residents at risk.

The property's solution was to preprogram fobs for each unit and treat them like traditional keys. When employees needed a fob, they checked it out using an electronic key control system. With this process, the property manager was able to track who accessed each unit and when, and employees were able to spend less time managing fobs and more time focusing on residents.

When it comes to your access control processes, you should strive for a similar balance between efficiency and security.

2. Abuse of Access Privileges Breaks Residents' Trust

While renters don't own their homes, it's still important for multifamily employees to maintain their trust by respecting their private lives and personal property. If an employee abuses their access control privileges, it instantly puts a strain on employee-resident relationships.

For example, how would a resident feel if they came home to find a maintenance technician in their home without having submitted a work order or being notified that a property employee would be entering the apartment? Or if they discovered that a leasing agent abused her access to residents' mailboxes to steal their information and apply for credit in their name? Or if one of their neighbors, a mother of two, was murdered in her apartment by someone who was given a key by the property's maintenance technician?

Some of these examples seem extreme, but they're all real scenarios people have described in property reviews and news reports — and they all left residents feeling shaken and vulnerable.

To avoid scenarios like these and maintain your community's trust, it's essential that you hold employees accountable for how and when they access units, follow proper notification protocol when you need to enter a resident's home and have a reliable record of who has accessed which units and when.



By taking the time to review your key control practices — even if you're not using traditional keys — you can maximize employees' time, preserve residents' trust and **protect your reputation.**

3. Security Incidents Hurt Your Reputation

It only takes one lost key or security breach to suffer a hit to your property's reputation. If a resident has a negative experience, they won't hesitate to share it in online reviews.

For example, several former residents of a Michigan property posted reviews in which they described maintenance technicians entering units without prior notification and lamented the property's recurring theft problem. Some referred to the property and staff as "creepy" and "terrifying."

Two former residents of a Washington multifamily community wrote in their reviews that mailbox keys and unit keys were stolen on two separate occasions. As a result, the property had to rekey the apartment community and install new mailboxes — a process that took weeks and required mail to be hand delivered in the meantime.

Since residents value security, these types of reviews aren't going to do any favors for your reputation or occupancy rates. When searching for an apartment, 94 percent of respondents in a survey by Entrata said they read online reviews. According to ForRent.com, Generation Z, the up-and-coming generation of renters, especially places a lot of weight on word of mouth and reviews.

Monitoring what people say about you online is important, but building a positive reputation begins with the experience residents have offline.

Evaluate Your Key Control Practices

To ensure your key control procedures provide the kind of living experience residents expect, start with the following best practices:

- Implement a written policy for managing keys or security tokens.
- Periodically give your employees a refresher on your key control policy.
- Avoid storing keys on a pegboard or in a lockbox where they can be easily removed. Instead, secure keys in an electronic key control system consisting of steel drawers or a tamper-proof panel.
- Refrain from programming master versions of key fobs or access cards.
- Treat preprogrammed security tokens with the same level of security you would traditional keys, storing them in a secure location and restricting who can access them.
- Automatically track when unit keys or security tokens are removed and returned.
- Restrict employees' unit access to specific time periods, such as during business hours or on-call days.

• Never leave keys out in the open or anywhere else where they would be susceptible to being stolen.

• Don't forget to notify residents when employees need to access their apartments, especially if a resident hasn't submitted a work order.

• Look for and address complaints about security concerns in online reviews.

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Carl Hanly is a regional manager with KeyTrak, Inc., where he has worked for 19 years. He specializes in helping multifamily housing, student housing, military housing and corporate housing clients conveniently minimize risks associated with managing their resident keys. He has received his Certified Apartment Supplier (CAS) accreditation from the National Apartment Association and has completed NAA's Leadership Lyceum training. He is actively involved with the NAA National Supplier Council. Hanly can be reached at chanly@keytrak.com.



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