

Preparing for Temporary Workforce Reductions

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Purpose: To assist National Apartment Association (NAA) members with strategic planning and preparing for handling daily operations while contending with the prospect of temporary employee reductions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Applies to: Human Resource Directors, C-Suite Leadership, Regional Managers and all other NAA members involved in workforce management.

Overview: More than 70 percent of companies didn't have a crisis management plan in place when the coronavirus outbreak began, according to a survey from Blank Rome. Even those companies that had plans in place were better prepared for natural disasters such as floods and fires rather than a global pandemic like COVID-19. There are many reasons as to why your workforce may be reduced as a result of this pandemic, including sick employees, lack of childcare or elder care, fear of returning to work, caring for a sick family member, furloughs or layoffs and a lack of public transportation. Does your crisis management plan include options for limited staff operations?

This best practice document discusses guidance for managing a workforce reduction, and will review communications practices and methodologies for supervising a reduced workforce to ensure a sustainable go-forward plan.

Guidance:

1. **Leasing** – Online leasing is a solid option when staffing is limited at the property level. Even if you do not have a platform for online leasing, you can refer potential residents to online videos with links on your website and via social media outlets. For in-person tours, consider self-guided tours that allow the prospective residents an opportunity to view a model apartment on their own or encourage prospects to make an appointment to tour in person. You can then ensure a staff member is available at the specified day and time to assist the prospect.
2. **Maintenance** – If your team is short-handed for maintenance personnel, you may consider holding all routine maintenance requests until staffing returns to normal. For emergency requests, a plan should be put into place such as a call center to determine the nature of the emergency and whether an on-call maintenance technician from another property can assist, or if a list of contractors should be notified for specific issues. If a call center is not an option, the property manager or other company employee should be checking messages or calls for all emergency requests. It is advised that changes in maintenance should be communicated to residents, especially if residents should expect new faces in their apartment or if there will be a delay in responding to routine maintenance needs.

Work orders should be prioritized based on the level of urgency with the understanding that there is a limit to the number of daily service requests the maintenance staff can safely handle. The maintenance team should follow COVID-19 protocol regarding Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines while utilizing proper personal protective equipment (PPE).

3. **Communication** – Communication is the key to success with a reduced workforce. The remaining team members should understand all changes in processes and workflow. In addition, supplier partners need to be made aware of who to communicate with at your company or property.
4. **Automation** – Automation can assist with freeing up staff time and enhancing their work. This becomes extremely helpful in ensuring everything is taken care of when staffing is limited. Rent collection, leasing, maintenance and resident communication are all areas of property management in which teams can benefit from using this technology.
5. **Technology** – To continue limiting unnecessary exposure, an emphasis should be placed on opportunities to leverage technology in the workplace and when interacting with residents. This includes the ability to renew leases and pay rent online, virtual meetings versus face-to-face interaction, submitting resident service requests and holding virtual events to keep residents engaged from a distance. Technology can also be used for other employees to communicate with residents and continue property operations while staff is limited.
6. **Temporary Employees** – Establish a relationship with a local staffing agency that can assist with providing temporary employees on an as-needed basis. This may be critical if an employee is going to be absent for a long period of time to avoid interruptions to daily operations.
7. **Workplace Safety** – The overall goal is to provide employees with safe and sanitary working conditions while putting measures into place that will prevent exposure. Employers are legally permitted to check employees' temperatures and are also currently being encouraged to do so by the CDC. Additional measures include masks, gloves, routine handwashing and daily questionnaires focused on health and exposure.
8. **Flexibility** – Similar to influenza, COVID-19 has the potential to create repeated and ongoing outbreaks. Employees may be absent because they are sick; are caregivers for sick family members; are caregivers for children if schools or daycare centers are closed; have at-risk individuals at home, such as immunocompromised family members; or are afraid to come to work because of fear of possible exposure.

According to Axios, more than 40 percent of American workers between 20 and 54 have children at home, and at least one parent may have to stay home with their children if schools do not fully open this fall. Leaders should focus on opportunity for employee flexibility in schedule and location. For some teams, this may mean different shifts of employees need to be in the office at different times, or they trade off week-by-week, individual-by-individual. Understand that employees may need to alter their hours to adjust to life during the pandemic, which may include reduced hours and longer lunch breaks.

Develop a plan that will allow the employee to balance at-home needs while also maximizing work productivity. Workplace flexibility may assist with allowing employees to continue employment while also ensuring business operations remain at an optimal level. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recommends not requiring a healthcare provider's note for employees who are sick with acute respiratory illness to validate their illness or to return to work, as healthcare provider offices and medical facilities may be extremely busy and unable to provide documentation in a timely fashion.

9. **Reasonable Accommodations** – You may experience employee(s) who request to work from home during this pandemic because of health concerns. According to the [CDC](#), individuals who may be at higher risk for developing complications associated with COVID-19 include older adults and

individuals who have serious chronic medical conditions, like heart disease, diabetes, lung disease and compromised immune systems. This means that when an employer receives a request for accommodation to reduce or eliminate the risk of exposure to the coronavirus, an employer must consider this request under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) and engage in the interactive process to provide reasonable accommodations, barring undue hardship. The ADA regulates employers' disability-related inquiries and medical examinations for all applicants and employees, prohibits covered employers from excluding individuals with disabilities from the workplace for health or safety reasons unless they pose a "direct threat" and requires reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities (absent undue hardship) during a pandemic.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) guidance on [Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace and the ADA](#) is a useful guide for employers who have ADA-compliance questions. Employers have the discretion to make workplace modifications that will benefit employees and public health. Employers may want to discuss questions regarding workplace modifications in response to the coronavirus with an appropriate legal professional to determine how to manage situations involving higher risk employees and caregivers of individuals with disabilities.

- 10. Telework** – Employers may require or encourage employees to work remotely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to CDC, remote work arrangements are considered an effective infection control strategy. Employees who are in high risk groups might request remote work as a reasonable accommodation (mentioned above) to reduce their chances of infection. Telework can also be a solution for employees who may have been exposed to the virus and are self-isolating.

Related Links and Forms

[Return to Work Checklist](#)

[Cleaning and Disinfecting](#)

[Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act](#)

About NAA

The National Apartment Association (NAA) serves as the leading voice and preeminent resource through advocacy, education and collaboration on behalf of the rental housing industry. As a federation of more than 150 state and local affiliates, NAA encompasses over 82,000 members representing more than 10 million apartment homes globally. NAA believes that rental housing is a valuable partner in every community that emphasizes integrity, accountability, collaboration, community responsibility, inclusivity and innovation. NAA thanks its strategic partners Maintenance Supply Headquarters, a Lowe's company and Yardi. To learn more, visit www.naahq.org.

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