

## Leasing Safety

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**Purpose:** To ensure that National Apartment Association (NAA) members understand the importance of preparations and procedures in leasing safety. There are several common-sense (but not necessarily intuitive) steps for leasing agents and onsite staff to take when vetting prospective residents to guard against the possibility of any threat.

**Applies to:** All NAA members who are involved in the leasing of apartment homes, specifically those who conduct tours for prospective residents.

**Overview:** Leasing apartments is a job that often involves working alone in closed off areas with potential residents who are unknown to the leasing agent. Leasing safety procedures can help to guard against preventable tragedies. According to The Real Deal, a 2017 National Association of Realtors survey found that 44 percent of real estate offices have clearly delineated agent safety procedures, while more than half of agents (52 percent of men and 57 percent of women) carry pepper spray, Tasers, noisemakers and other self-defense weapons.

Ultimately, apartment management companies should recognize that a leasing agent's job is to show apartments to strangers, sometimes on the weekends when no one is around. Even in broad daylight, it's a lone-worker scenario. It's important to document everyone who comes into the apartment community and where they've been taken, as well as to have a detailed plan to proactively mitigate risks. These plans need to account for the nature of the asset, including how many people are onsite at any given time. Good habits and best practices will assist to protect anyone from getting hurt, abducted or worse. Apartment managers should never assume that, "it can't happen here."

Robynn Haydock, owner of Halo Properties LLC in Hendersonville, Tenn., was once training a leasing consultant in an 11-unit building. They took two men to an apartment on a day when no one else was in the building. When one of the men suddenly asked whether the building accepted sex offenders, the trainee, in her third day on the job, made a beeline out of the building. Haydock answered the man by saying the building did not take sex offenders, and the man informed her that both he and his son, the other man on the scene, were sex offenders. Haydock politely walked out the door, let them go past and the trainee held the outside door open.

No harm resulted. But Haydock, also a Principal at High Road Education and Consulting and a certified instructor for National Apartment Association Education Institute (NAAEI) credential courses, said there were lessons learned, nonetheless. "If we had been better about asking prequalifying questions, we would never have been in that situation," she said. "It was that moment of [realization that], 'I'm standing here with two sex offenders who are three times my size, with a new hire.'"

## Guidance:

1. **Explain Tour Policy** – Inform prospective residents about company policies concerning apartment tours to set clear expectations. Such policies may include only showing apartments during the day, not keeping cash in the leasing office and requiring a valid photo identification card prior to touring an apartment. You should always be consistent with the procedure for handling tours and ensure compliance with Fair Housing laws.
2. **Review Valid Identification** – Ask for identification from all prospective residents requesting a tour, to include not just the person who makes the appointment but anyone else who comes in with them—or who gets out of a car to join you as you're headed toward the apartment. It is very important that you do not forget to ask any visitor for an ID because any variation from this policy could lead to the appearance that you or your communities are acting in a discriminatory manner. If Aunt Martha is in town and came along to see the apartment but doesn't have her purse, offer her a cup of tea and suggest that she wait in the office while you tour.

Make sure that the picture matches the person and that the ID is government-issued, whether a driver's license, military ID, state ID card, visa or passport. Collect the ID and put it in a locked office drawer during the tour. Realize that some IDs may be invalid and consider using a verification service; as many as 3 percent of IDs have been falsified, according to Apartment Guardian. Without verification, you can't be 100 percent certain the person is who they say they are. Be consistent with asking all prospects attending the tour for their ID. If someone cannot produce an ID, then you can offer to re-schedule a time for them to return whenever it is convenient.

3. **Communicate with Colleagues** – Introduce prospective residents to any colleagues in the leasing office, which will signal friendliness and allow easier identification later should the need arise. Make sure that another staff member knows that you're going on a tour and to which apartment: "I want you to know that I'm taking Mr. Johnson to apartment 311." If the prospect changes their mind at that point and wants to see a different unit, communicate that back to the office. If you are on your own, alert a member of your maintenance team by telephone or radio, or leave a message with your answering service. Another trick to alert a colleague of a potential situation is to use a code phrase if someone seems suspicious, for instance, "Melissa, can you check the red file?" or, "The Smiths' cat is out again." The prospect will have no idea what that means, but your colleagues will know something seems suspicious and that you are uncomfortable.
4. **Carry a Device** – It's important that, at the very least, you have one safety device on you while showing vacancies to leads. To be able to contact a colleague, you will need to have a communication device with you the entire time. If you are carrying a mobile phone, make sure it's charged and in hand, always ready to use.

There are safety apps proven successful in situations where you can discretely use your phone like in an active shooter situation. One common app is the Red Panic Button app. This app sends out a call for help with your current location to your set emergency contacts through text, email, Facebook and Twitter messages. Additionally, you can set it so that it takes only a few steps to activate. No matter what, your safety is paramount.

That said, it's up to your company policy to determine what safety devices are approved and most effective for employees. Two-way radios remain a reliable form of communication and allow for usage where cell service is spotty or unavailable. While calling back to the office is helpful in many instances, if you have an actual emergency, try to get out of the apartment and call 9-1-1 as quickly as possible; or at least signal to someone back in the office that they should call for help. In that instance, try to stay calm and communicate what type of service you need and why. If someone has a

weapon—or you think they might—be sure to say so. Realize that getting out of the apartment is your priority; if someone is trying to attack you, especially someone larger than you, it's going to be challenging to hold your phone, navigate to the right screen and dial. In addition, companies offer panic button devices that allow emergency services to be notified in real time in an emergency. To be especially cautious, in addition to having communication devices, consider keeping a pocket-sized personal alarm. These devices can be put on your keychain and typically are disguised to look like car alarms. When pressed, it blasts a loud sound and can startle an attacker enough to give you time to escape.

5. **Lead from Behind** – Never turn your back on a prospect. Let them lead you toward and then into the apartment by using hand gestures to beckon them forward. Maintain a safe distance between yourself and the prospect. Pay attention to your surroundings and people's movements. Stand to the side of an apartment door as you unlock it, signal that the prospect should go through first and do not close the door behind you as you enter. Turning the deadbolt with the door open prevents it from being slammed shut, as do devices that wedge in the door jam and prop it open. Do not allow prospects to get between you and an exterior door or in a room with an interior door, and never walk into smaller areas like bathrooms or closets. Let prospects explore the interior by themselves—they can use a little space and time to think and being out of the way will make the space look subtly larger. This also gives you a moment to process their body language and other nonverbal cues if there's any cause for alarm, as well as giving you a sense from a sales perspective of how well they like the space. Certainly, do not lead the way into a basement or attic—tell the prospective resident they are welcome to explore, and that you will be waiting for them by the door when they're finished.
6. **Wear Sensible Shoes** – Comfortable shoes are encouraged given the amount of walking, climbing stairs and traversing of uneven ground you will be doing when touring. They're also safer if you need to flee or defend yourself. Shoes should have non-skid soles, and ladies' heels should be no higher than 3 inches. Paying attention to the weather is key to wearing proper shoes, especially when forecasts call for snow, rain and other sub-optimal conditions.
7. **Be on Guard** – Pay attention to the prospective resident at all times. If you are talking on your phone or answering emails, it's much easier for a would-be attacker to strike. Apologize and excuse yourself from the apartment if you absolutely must take a call—and do so outside. Make sure you know where all the exits to a property are in case you end up in a dangerous situation. As difficult situations arise, it is important to be prepared to handle anger or disappointment of a potential resident if a rental application is denied. It might be helpful for your staff to learn de-escalation techniques to diffuse a situation.

To help ward off an attack before it starts, leasing agents should be trained to maintain the proper body language and facial expressions so that their personal boundaries are respected. This includes direct eye contact, upright posture, a brisk gait, friendly and confident greetings and hands that are always visible. Signals that are inviting to a bad actor include downcast eyes, walking unsteady or your thoughts appearing to be elsewhere. In addition to sensible shoes, agents should wear no-nonsense business attire and strike a confident, assertive pose, even if they're feeling nervous. Always be aware of your surroundings, looking to the sides and behind you, moving around corners with caution and minding partially open doorways.

8. **No Touring After Dark** – Touring hours should be decided in advance and posted in the leasing office, on the community website and other avenues such as with the answering service. It is advised that all tours should take place during daytime hours. Daylight saving time should be taken into consideration when updating tour hours semi-annually. It is beneficial to set parameters like ending tours 30 minutes prior to the office closing to ensure all staff members can return to the office safely

before dark. Offering weekend availability for tours can be helpful for those prospective residents who simply can't visit during regular business hours. Some leasing companies are providing prospective residents with a code to enter a model home after dark and sending them out into the community for self-guided tours without a leasing agent present.

9. **Leasing is a Team Effort** – Train your entire staff to keep their eyes open for potential concerns with prospective residents. If you get an uneasy feeling, ask a colleague to accompany you on the tour or meet you at the apartment. Using the “buddy system” and inviting another member of the leasing or maintenance team will add a level of comfort for the leasing agent and may prevent the prospect from a potentially unsafe situation. You can pretend that you need the maintenance supervisor to check a kitchen light or a similar excuse. If a leasing agent seems to have been in an apartment for a suspiciously long period of time, a maintenance supervisor may enter the building and act like they're looking for a paint bucket. We recommend you bring all staff, including leasing and maintenance staff, into your office to refresh them on best practices.
10. **The Role of Management:** Property management companies can take several steps to bolster their communities' safety and, by extension, that of their leasing agents through environmental design. These include trimming landscaping (ideally to heights of no more than 2 feet), ensuring that lights are working through regular audits (and switching to LEDs for a broader and brighter reach), placing surveillance cameras strategically around the property, checking entry doors on a regular basis to ensure that locks work properly and perhaps erecting perimeter fencing or guarded gates.

Communities designed with natural surveillance—putting demo units in highly visible areas, near parking lots or playgrounds where people might be walking, for example—make would-be criminal feels less at home. As does proper maintenance: Excess trash around the Dumpsters or broken light fixtures or gates signals that the community is not well kept. Train maintenance staff to check on leasing agents and consider staggering their schedules, both so residents have someone to call during at least some non-business hours but also so that someone else is onsite whenever the leasing office is handling showings. Hold local crime prevention meetings at your community and encourage management staff to attend. Lastly, keep staff abreast of trends in your neighborhood's crime statistics so they know what to watch for over time. Establish and publish clear safety guidelines for your leasing agents so there are no questions or uncertainty concerning crime or injury prevention. Then make sure to communicate these safety guidelines to everyone in the office, including all new staff.

## **Related Links and Forms**

Gingko Residential LLC safety video: <https://youtu.be/9mjydx2YJxU>

Gingko Residential LLC leasing guidelines (attached PDF)

Leonardo247 article on safety tips for showing apartments:  
<http://www.leonardo247.com/unit-showing-safety-tips/>

Apartment Guardian blog posts on leasing safety:  
<https://apartmentguardian.com/residential-leasing-has-become-a-high-risk-job/>  
<https://apartmentguardian.com/what-really-works-for-on-site-safety/>

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## **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 and Yardi. To learn more, visit [www.naahq.org](http://www.naahq.org).