**Best Practices**

**CONTROLLING LOSSES IN VACANT BUILDING**

Vacant properties can present significant loss potential to any district. Although the location of the property and problems that exist in a particular area may vary, it is critical that school districts understand and recognize the most common vacant property risks to ensure proper measures are taken to mitigate losses.

**Common areas of loss associated with a vacant property include:**

* Vandalism
* Break-ins and burglary
* Damage from fire and smoke
* Water damage
* Damage from storms and wind

Losses can happen at any time, and the duration of time a property is vacant can increase the risk of damages to the building. The longer a property is vacant, the more likely a loss will occur.

**Plan**

**Prepare for Vacancy**

Proper preparation prior to a building becoming vacant can help reduce loss exposures. The following are steps that district management together with representatives from Facilities and Maintenance and Operations should consider prior to a building becoming vacant:

Mitigate exposures from hazardous operations, in particular those involving flammable liquids and hazardous materials. Hazardous and flammable materials should be removed from the property. These include:

* Pollutants, chemicals or combustible materials which will prevent explosion, leaks, seepage or contamination. These materials could also affect first responders and those who have to enter the building in an emergency.
* Containers that might be attractive for trash or hazardous waste dumping such as used motor oil or chemicals.
* Combustible materials and other ignition sources such as fixtures, furniture and equipment which may also reduce fire hazards.
* Plan for regular tests of fire protection system alarms to ensure they remain operational.
* The installation of fencing or other barriers to limit access to the property can also help dieter vandalism.
* Instruct employees and subcontracts on security practices for the building.

**Notify**

**Law Enforcement/ Fire Department**

Notify police and fire departments that the property will be idle.

**Inspect**

## Inspecting the Property

## A simple way to reduce losses associated with a vacant property is arranging frequent and unscheduled inspections; including the use of an outside security service. Working with a security service or local law enforcement to conduct frequent rounds will detract vandals and thieves.

Visit the property at least once per week to evaluate the condition of the building and damages that may have occurred. The visit should include checks of general conditions to ensure that important areas are secured and that all fire protection intrusion detection systems and fencing are maintained and in working order.

**Secure**

## Districts should take steps to prevent unauthorized persons from gaining access to the property. However, it is important that access for fire fighters and police is not unduly impaired. Preventive steps include:

## Security fencing, barriers or plants with thorns

## Locking all doors, windows, and openings

## Limiting access points to the property and facility

## Block parking lot entrances to prevent vehicles and pedestrians from entering

## Include “No Trespassing” signage to prevent “permissive use” arguments

## Video cameras should be installed and strategically located on both the exterior and interior of the facility

**Lighting**

Over 90% of crime occurs after dark. Lighting is a tool that when used wisely, can increase security and safety. How much light is needed, depends on the size and characteristics of the area. A good way to determine where light is needed is to visit the property at night and think like a criminal.

* + Where could someone break in?
  + Where would someone hide?
  + Can others see activity in or near the building?

Lighting should be bright and positioned to prevent dark areas around the property. Keep in mind that dim light provides enough light for criminals to see what they are doing, but not enough for others to observe them. Bright light allows for easier property observation by police, security, neighbors and others. In some cases, darkness can be better than lighting. If there is no one around to witness and report crimes *and* if lighting helps criminals see what they are doing, darkness may be a better alternative.

**Utilities**

It is important to keep electricity turned on so that alarms and lighting can function including emergency exit signs and emergency lighting. Shut off non-essential utilities such as gas. Properly shut down any non-essential equipment or systems and disconnect to the greatest extent possible.

**Maintenance**

## Maintain the Property

Plan regular maintenance routines to check pipes, foundation, roof, gutters and look for insects or other pests that may damage the property. Regular maintenance can reduce the risk of damaged or frozen pipes, sprinklers that leak, or damages associated with weather. Take measures to repair damages, such as graffiti and other items immediately. Frequent maintenance will help lower the cost of repairs.

* Repairing broken windows. Break-resistant replacements or film should be considered if broken windows are common.
* Clean up of any litter/trash
* Repairing broken lighting and replace bulbs
* Maintaining pest control services
* If the property has sidewalks or areas used by the public, safe walking surfaces should be maintained, including leaf, snow and ice removal
* Holes or gaps in the fencing should be repaired. Fencing should also be checked for adequate attachment to post and ties.

Property owners should maintain landscaping to give the appearance of occupancy and to reduce hiding spaces from shrub and foliage overgrowth. Ensure that foliage near light fixtures and entrances are maintained as to not effect light direction.

## Check Fire Detection Systems

Fires can occur unexpectedly and the resulting damage in vacant buildings can be significant. To mitigate this risk, ensure that the fire sprinkler and detection systems are working properly.

Conduct weekly recorded inspections of sprinkler control valves, fire extinguishers, and other fire protection equipment.

Vacant properties pose a variety of risks. Routine property maintenance and repairs will reduce the potential of damages as well as the resulting financial impact associated with repairs.

**Protection**

## Burglary Alarm/System

A burglary alarm monitors entrances/exits and windows for intrusion and can help protect against unauthorized entrance to the building.

## Security Service

An effective solution is to hire security personnel assigned to the property to monitor for any security threat (vandals, trespassers, etc.). They can make a huge difference in potential loss to a vacant facility. The degree of security depends on the location and vulnerability of the structure from loss due to potential intruders, homeless or vandals.

## Anonymous Reporting:

A way for individuals to report information to your agency about the property without providing a name may provide useful information. Communicating information about the reporting tool and how to use it in the area around the property is essential to getting utilization.

**Vacant Building Inspection Checklist**

**Security**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Description** | **Yes** | **No** |
| Doors and windows are in good condition and locked |  |  |
| Roof hatches and vents are property secured |  |  |
| Perimeter fence shows no sign of breaches |  |  |
| Gates are chained and locked |  |  |
| Burglar alarms are in service |  |  |
| Security alarm company regularly tests alarms and confirms receipt of signals |  |  |
| **Comments:** |  |  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Description** | **Yes** | **No** |
| Automatic sprinkler system is in good working conditions |  |  |
| Fire protection systems are inspected and tested per NRPA 25 |  |  |
| Automatic sprinkler system pressure gauge(s) indicate adequate pressure |  |  |
| Water supply is in service |  |  |
| All fire protection valves are locked in the open position |  |  |
| All fire alarms (waterflow, valve tamper, smoke detectors, and heat detectors) are in service |  |  |
| Fire alarm company regularly tests alarms and confirms receipt of signals |  |  |
| Sprinkler heads are free from obstructions |  |  |
| Fire doors are closed |  |  |
| Standpipe system is operational |  |  |
| Standpipe hose is in place and in good condition |  |  |
| Fire Department Connection (FDC) is free from obstruction |  |  |
| Hydrants are in good conditions and are accessible |  |  |
| **Comments:** |  |  |

**Fire Protection Systems**

**Maintenance**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Description** | **Yes** | **No** |
| Exterior lighting is in good working order |  |  |
| Exterior is free of litter/trash |  |  |
| Interior is free of litter/trash |  |  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Description** | **Yes** | **No** |
| Building inspected for any sign of vandalism/graffiti |  |  |
| Building inspected for any sign of intrusion/breach |  |  |
| Roof inspected including roof drains and scuppers |  |  |
| Building heating system is in good working order |  |  |
| Temperature alarm is in service, regularly tested and confirmed receipt of alert signals |  |  |
| Lawn and landscaping are adequately trimmed |  |  |
| No signs of pests |  |  |
| Inspect plumbing connections and fittings for signs of leaks and/or corrosion |  |  |
| Sidewalks and areas used by the public are in good working condition |  |  |
| **Comments:** | | |