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# Managing Physical Keys While Social Distancing

## Adapting your key control procedures during COVID-19.

By **CARL HANLY**, CAS, KeyTrak Regional Manager

**C**COVID-19 has forced businesses to adapt how they operate, and the multifamily industry is no exception. Despite many leasing offices being closed, except by appointment only, the hustle and bustle hasn't stopped — it has only changed.

Whether it's vendors needing access to apartments, new residents moving in or a leasing agent showing a vacant unit, keys frequently change hands at an apartment community. With the social distancing restrictions required to prevent the spread of COVID-19, operations that require close interpersonal contact and frequent handling of high-touch surfaces, like keys, has become complicated.

If your property uses physical keys (or smart tokens that function similarly to keys), how do you manage these hand-offs while maintaining social distancing?

### Take Advantage of Video

Offering prerecorded videos can help cut down on the traffic through your property while keeping prospects engaged in the leasing process. Film tours of your model apartment, any empty units, the building exterior and amenities.

Before you shoot your videos, think about the questions people ask most: How big are the bedrooms? How secure is the property? What changes am I allowed to make when decorating? Where will I park? Be sure to address these questions during your tour and show off the features that set the space apart, like a stunning view, oversized closets or a large kitchen.

For a more personalized experience, take prospects on live video tours using Zoom, FaceTime, Skype or whatever platform the person prefers. The prospect will have the chance to ask questions or spend time looking at whatever part of the apartment they're interested in. However, you'll be able to maintain a safe distance without the complications of self-led tours.

### Plan Ahead for Granting Access to Apartments

As helpful as video is, some people want to see the property for themselves before signing a lease. In other situations, like vendors needing to work in the apartment or new residents moving in, there's no way around the

fact that you'll need to provide physical access to the apartment.

In these scenarios, you have a few options:

1. Place the key in a predetermined location, such as under a mat or in the door, leaving the apartment door locked.
2. Unlock the unit a few minutes before the appointment time and let the person know how long they have to be in the apartment.
3. Provide access as you normally would.

The downside of the first option is that the key isn't secure, and there's always the risk that someone other than the intended recipient could find and use the key. With the second option, the key never leaves your hands, but leaving the unit unlocked is, of course, a liability. If you have security cameras that provide a view of apartment doors, you may feel more comfortable with one of the first two options.

With the third option, you can maintain control of the key without leaving apartments unlocked and unattended. To protect all parties, everyone should remain at least 6 feet apart and wear masks.

Regardless of how you choose to manage apartment access, communication is key. Let the rest of the property team know about scheduled appointments, revised policies, etc. Give visitors clear instructions, preferably in writing, about where to go, what to do and what the timeline will be.

### Keep Track of Keys

Whenever an employee removes a key, it's critical to have a verifiable record of when they took it, why they needed it and when it was returned. To ensure keys are available and accessible when someone needs them, make sure only authorized employees remove them. It's ideal to manage keys with an electronic key control system that automatically authenticates users and records when each key is removed, but you should at least keep keys in a locked area only employees can access.

Not only are these measures security best practices, but employees will know who has a key at any given time. This is especially important if employees are still working remotely and coming onsite specifically for scheduled appointments. It would be inefficient and frustrating for them to make a special trip to the property only to discover the key they need isn't available. In addition, if your records are inaccur-


rate, it'll be difficult to investigate situations where a key has been lost or misused.

### Take Sanitary Precautions

The Centers for Disease Control recommends frequently cleaning and disinfecting high-touch surfaces using products approved by the Environmental Protection Agency. That includes all doorknobs, light switches, faucets, appliance handles and counters in an apartment and in the leasing office. You'll want to do the same for your keys and technology such as smart tokens, key control systems, computers and computer accessories.

To avoid damaging electronics, follow the manufacturer's guidelines. Many technology providers specifically recommend against using certain types of cleaners, such as highly concentrated alcohol (above 70%), bleach or ammonia solutions.

If you have a central location where someone will be retrieving keys, such as from an electronic key control system, consider setting out the appropriate cleaning supplies along with a brief flyer with cleaning instructions so employees can clean and disinfect keys and equipment immediately after handling them. Also encourage employees to regularly wash their hands for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer.

Without a doubt, the industry will continue to evolve and adapt, pandemic or not. The key to rising above the challenges you face is prioritizing the health and safety of your residents and employees while taking steps to reduce your property's liability. 



Carl Hanly is a regional manager with KeyTrak, Inc., where he has worked for 20 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 (NAA) and has completed NAA's Leadership Lyceum training. He is actively involved with the NAA National Supplier Council.