PROPERTY MANAGERS/REALTORS Nashville

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Vendor Guide

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HOW TO AVOID A MESSY KEY SITUATION

By Carl Hanly, CAS, KeyTrak

Are you struggling to sort out a messy key situation? Whether it's a master key system that's racking up locksmith costs, a pegboard and logbook you can't reconcile, an electronic key control system that doesn't come with the training and support you need, or a smart lock system that's more time-consuming to manage than you anticipated, managing access to residents' homes can feel daunting.

If you want to improve key security at your property, start with these steps:

- **Be Cautious with Master Keys** - Avoid using master keys as much as possible, especially for routine tasks such as showing units and performing repairs. If you use master keys for emergencies, lock them up securely. These guidelines also apply to smart lock tokens that function like master keys.

- **Keep Accurate Records** - Key activity reports don't just help you cut down on lost keys. They can also help you look into allegations about improper key use. Every time someone removes or returns a key, record their name, the date and time, who removed the key, and their reason for using it.

- **Minimize Manual Steps** - If people have to complete manual steps such as updating a logbook when removing a key, they're more likely to make mistakes.

- **Control Key Access** - Store keys securely in a locked key control system to restrict access to authorized employees only.

Find the Right Key and Access Control Method

First, let's talk about the most common key control methods apartment communities use.

Master Keys

If you use master keys, it's challenging to track key use, which is a liability for your property if there's a security breach. For example, if someone removes a master key to enter apartment #221, you can't prove they didn't use the key to instead enter apartment #102. Also consider the overhead and cost of rekeying every unit if a key goes missing.

Manual Process

If your property has a limited budget, you might gravitate toward a manual key control process, such as a pegboard or wall-mounted metal cabinet, since it requires minimal upfront investment. However, this method of storing keys isn't secure - anyone can remove a key from a hook or pry open a cabinet. It's also difficult to keep an accurate key log since employees have to manually update a logbook or spreadsheet.

Electronic Key Control Systems

Electronic key control systems store keys in wall-mounted panels or electronic drawers. They're controlled by a central operating system running key control software that electronically records when a key is removed. By automatically recording an audit trail of key use and allowing managers to set up user permissions, the systems reduce the likelihood of human error (as long as they don't require manual steps like scanning key tags).

If they're made of sturdy materials such as thick glass or tamper-proof steel, they also provide more physical security for keys than pegboards or basic metal cabinets.

The biggest drawback is the learning curve, but many systems are intuitive, and a good technology partner will offer training.

Smart Locks

Smart locks allow residents to unlock their doors with codes, fobs, or their smartphones. They're becoming more popular due to the lower lockout risk and the ability for residents to remotely grant friends and family access to their units. In addition, property managers can track who's accessed each unit and when, and even offer self-guided tours to prospects.

Electronic locks may have some perks, but they require more administrative effort than you may realize. Some systems, for example, offer the option to use traditional metal keys as backups in case the smart lock system goes down, which means the property needs a way to manage physical keys.

Even if the system is 100 percent keyless, it may come with security tokens such as key fobs or cards. Programming these tokens can easily become a full-time job, which has led some apartment communities to program master versions of their security tokens. This practice is no different from using master keys. One solution to this issue is to program a token for each unit in advance and manage them with an electronic key control systems.

Sorting out a messy key situation can seem overwhelming, but it's worth it to protect your residents, increase your efficiency, and reduce your liability. To evaluate how well you're managing your keys, **visit keytrak.com/quiz.**

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