

Vanquishing vandalism

Persistence and problem-solving help property managers deal with destruction

by Markisan Naso

Whether property managers oversee an office building, industrial complex or an apartment community, chances are they have to deal with vandalism. From graffiti to broken windows to damaged faucets and thermostats, destruction or defacing of property is a common and often costly concern for many facilities and property managers.

This kind of destruction also affects the property from an aesthetic standpoint, said Richard Muhlebach, CPM®, and senior management director at Kennedy-Wilson Properties Northwest Ltd., in Bellevue, Wash.

“All types of vandalism—whether it’s broken windows or graffiti—make the property look run down and less than what it is,” he said.

Dealing with vandalism requires property owners and managers to stay one step ahead of the problem. Knowing the property’s surroundings and what is happening in the neighborhood is key. Buildings located near schools, shopping centers, parks, parking lots or other places frequented by young people, are often potential targets for vandalism; Muhlebach said youth are often responsible for damaged property and graffiti. Gangs may also be responsible for graffiti, he said, because they use it to mark their territory.

“In my experience, graffiti is the most common form of vandalism, particularly on the larger properties like shopping centers and industrial complexes that are closed down at night,”

Muhlebach said. “There’s a huge canvas on shopping centers and industrial properties for graffiti.”

Moving targets

Keeping vandalism at bay starts with identifying those areas of a facility that are likely targets. Vandals will often attack properties where they won’t be seen. Places with no lighting, where lighting is low, where a building design offers concealment, or where surveillance is minimal, are typically prime areas for vandalism.

The restroom is one of the most popular places for wanton destruction. Stall doors, partitions, light fixtures, drains, soap dispensers and paper towel holders in a lavatory offer vandals a variety of equipment to smash, kick or deface in secret.

Once potential target areas like restrooms and low-lit areas have been identified, property managers need to find solutions for preventing damage. The most important part of prevention is to be proactive. Walking around a site and constantly monitoring a property for possible signs of vandalism is a good idea. Property managers can’t be at one location all the time, so it’s also important to establish a good relationship with tenants, residents and vendors.

“They can be another set of eyes and ears,” Muhlebach said. “Ask them to report anything suspicious to management and call 911 immediately.”

Muhlebach said taking the time to educate tenants and residents on

vandalism is also helpful, especially at shopping centers and other properties with a lot of part-time and seasonal help; they won’t know what to look out for if they aren’t at the property on a regular basis. Most residents or tenants are willing to be vigilant because vandalism can affect their business or their quality of life.

“No one likes to visit a property they feel is unsafe, which they may, [if vandalism occurs] a lot of the time,” said Shannon Alter, CPM, and real estate consultant.

Some property managers even host formal training sessions for residents or invite the police to come to the building and give a seminar on vandalism. If enough people in a neighborhood are aware of vandalism, the incident rate will decline. Involving the community in projects, like painting murals, can also be an effective way to prevent vandalism.

“If you have a mural painted by the community or a neighborhood that has a heritage to it, people are much less inclined to vandalize it,” Muhlebach said.

Keep out!

Along with resident, tenant and community outreach, property managers can also use equipment to discourage vandals. Mounting video cameras on a property has become a popular solution. The constant threat of monitoring often provides a good deterrent for would-be vandals.

Most cameras have a revolving tape managers keep for a few weeks. If an incident occurs, they can simply review the recording and contact the police. Although installing cameras is expensive and time consuming, many managers find they not only reduce vandalism, but they improve safety overall for tenants and residents.

Property managers may also consider upgrading breakable fixtures in their buildings. Swapping out ceramic sinks, toilets or urinals with stainless steel replacements reduces vandalism and eliminates repair costs. Touch-free fixtures also offer a good alternative as they have fewer breakable parts and use less water. Vandals may try to clog sinks and overflow water which can damage floors.

Other proven prevention methods include disposable soap dispensers, light bulb guards and graffiti-removal products like a clear, easy to peel-off coating that can be painted on the exterior of buildings. Some property managers also plant shrubs or plants with thorns in problem areas around their properties to ward off destruction.

Fences, gates or other barriers that restrict access to areas on a property are also good deterrents. Managers must make sure to lock any external doors, garages or gates to prevent unauthorized entry. Tools or equipment should also be secured as they are common targets for vandals.

Damage control

Should a building be vandalized, the best way to prevent further destruction is to address the problem right away. Broken windows, graffiti and other vis-



Graffiti is a common form of vandalism.

ible forms of vandalism tend to invite additional destruction.

“Physical damage to a property as a result of vandalism should be repaired, fixed or erased [in the case of graffiti] as soon as possible,” Alter said. “Not fixing it conveys to vandals the property owner either doesn’t have or want to spend the money to fix the issue, or doesn’t care.”

A quick response to vandalism can often be a great deterrent, especially for graffiti artists. If vandals paint something at night and it’s painted over in the morning, they won’t likely come back and paint on the wall because they want their drawings to stay up longer, Muhlebach said.

Property managers should also look for patterns in destruction. Vandalism on a property may continually occur on certain days or times of the year, like spring break or when a festival is

held in town. It’s a good idea to contact the local police department if recurring vandalism is suspected.

Property managers can also ask the police to patrol an area periodically. In some cities anti-graffiti programs are available to help paint out graffiti on public or private properties. One quick call and a team is dispatched to eliminate the mess. If the city can’t assist, Muhlebach said some neighborhoods join together and hire a company to paint out graffiti.

Preventing and reducing incidents of vandalism truly requires persistence. The more effort a property manager puts into monitoring and addressing the problem, the less likely vandals will return to break, smash or deface a property.

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