

# RISK CONTROL SERVICES

## VACANT UNITS

### What is a Vacant Unit?

A unit is considered vacant if it has no occupants or contents. An extended vacancy means that the unit or building has remained vacant for more than a two-week period. There are many reasons that units and buildings become vacant, including unit turnover, building rehabilitation, buildings awaiting demolition, and structural problems.

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### Vacancy Risks

Vacant units present the following risks:

- Vandalism and theft. Ninety percent of thefts in vacant buildings involve the removal of electrical or plumbing material made of copper. Once theft has occurred, restoring a building to selling condition can be expensive.
- Weather-related damage. Vacant units are more susceptible to freezing pipes, and the damage can remain undetected for an extended period of time since there is no one there to observe it.
- Fire. Forty-three percent of fires occurring in vacant units are intentionally set. Just like with water damage, since there are no occupants, it takes longer to detect and report a fire in a vacant structure.

### Maintaining Fire Protection Equipment

Sprinkler systems should remain active even if a building is unoccupied. Keeping the temperature above 55° F will help prevent the pipes from freezing. Sprinkler systems

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should be tested and maintained in accordance with National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 25.

### Eliminating Fire Hazards

Remove all combustible material from inside and outside the unit or building to help prevent fires. Make sure all equipment is turned off.

### Security

Secure the outside of vacant buildings with a perimeter fence to prevent trespassing, and secure all below-grade and ground-level doors and windows with locks. The roof should also be secured to prevent outside entry. Make sure to install monitoring alarms inside and outside the structure to detect intrusion and consider having the alarms monitored by a central-station alarm company. (A guard service providing monitoring 24-hours a day/seven days a week is an acceptable alternative.) Finally, be sure to install ample lighting. You can also consider working with the local police to monitor the property.

### Preparing for Bad Weather

The best way to prepare for bad weather is to plan for it. Inspect your roof regularly for sagging or ponding and to ensure that drains and scuppers aren't clogged. After a major storm, check the condition of the roof and building. If the vacant structure is located in an area with high winds, board up glass windows and doors. Should glass break, repair it immediately to prevent further damage.

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### Maintenance

If the water in the unit or building has been shut off and drained—this includes shutting off water at the street, draining faucets, water heaters, toilets, toilet tanks, and all other pipes, including exterior water lines—contact the appropriate utility companies to have all services disconnected.

Note that if you keep the water on, you must maintain the heat at 55° F or warmer, which means you cannot shut off the utilities. Also, per NFPA, if the building has a sprinkler system, the system needs to remain active, which means the water will need to remain on and the heat maintained.

Finally, be sure to maintain the inside and outside of the property to prevent slip, trip, and fall incidents.

### Monitoring the Property

Inspect the property daily or weekly at different times of the day. Note any signs of vandalism or trespassing.

### Sources and References

- [http://www.willis.com/documents/publications/Services/Claims\\_Management/Vacant\\_Idle\\_Bldgs.pdf](http://www.willis.com/documents/publications/Services/Claims_Management/Vacant_Idle_Bldgs.pdf)