

Too close for comfort: What are condominiums doing to prevent coronavirus?

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Claudia Go pushes a little stick on her key chain to operate the buttons on the elevator in her 250-unit condominium building in White Plains. Then she prays she doesn't run into any neighbors.

"It's hard because we are very neighborly," she said. "It's like I am afraid to see a neighbor because they'll want to chat, but I want to bolt."

Living in close quarters with upwards of 500 residents during the coronavirus pandemic can be a nerve-racking experience. How do you maintain social distance in the elevator? How do you navigate the laundry room? Is my next-door neighbor sick?

In the past month, building management companies and condominium and co-op associations have been implementing various COVID-19 safety protocols, including shutting down common areas such as fitness rooms and pools and restricting the number of people allowed in the elevators. Some have taken on extensive cleaning regimens and directed building superintendents to halt anything but emergency repairs.

So far, the Westchester County Department of Health has not issued any guidance for property owners and managers.

Tim Foley, executive director of the Building and Realty Institute of Westchester and the Mid-Hudson Region, one of the largest construction, development and real estate-related industry trade organizations, said the group first started convening calls with property managers and multifamily apartment building co-op and condo boards around March 10.

"One of the first recommendations we made over a month ago was just to suspend non-emergency repairs. It's just impossible for folks to understand what would be behind the door for a worker coming to do a repair," said Foley, a Scarsdale resident. "The repairs could potentially pose a real danger to both the residents as well as the workers because it's been largely impossible to tell who had been tested positive for COVID-19, who was in recommended quarantine, who was in a self-imposed quarantine or who was just working from home."

Jefferey Stillman, a vice president at Stillman Property Management, a third-generation family-owned company that manages 9,000 units throughout Westchester, the Bronx and Connecticut, said that for the most part residents have been co-operative.

His philosophy has been to be as conservative as possible.

"We are asking people to close their gyms and the community rooms. Why take a chance?" he said. "We are asking buildings to limit the number of people in the laundry room and we are asking our cleaning staff to clean elevators and other common areas as often as possible."

Stillman, who has weekly Zoom meetings with building managers, said there have been a few small

issues, such as a resident complaining about people not wearing masks (before it was mandated by Gov. Andrew Cuomo) or having to intervene to restrict the number of people in the laundry room, for the most part, residents have been co-operating with each other.

One thing residents in the buildings managed by Stillman have been asked to do is to inform them if they test positive for the coronavirus.

"And then we've sent letters to the residents just saying it's been reported, but we don't tell anybody who it is or where it is or anything like that," he said. "We had one building where that happened and we did shut down a laundry room and cleaned it completely because we believe those people were in there."

Knowing if someone has tested positive helps managers trace where residents have been so they can do extra cleaning in laundry rooms, lobbies and elevators, said Stillman, who manages 80 buildings that range from 30 to 500 apartments.

"In some of our properties, when we have had to resolve resident infractions of the virus protocols, we are sending reminder emails to all the residents reminding them to follow all the recommended procedures," he said.

If residents don't adhere to restrictions, Stillman said they would be reported to local law enforcement or the county health department.

Of course, not all buildings are taking similar precautions.

Go, the White Plains resident who uses the small stick in the elevator, is a behavioral health therapist who commutes to a group home in Rockland County.

At the beginning of the quarantine, she said, she'd still see elderly people in her building chatting in the common areas and not maintaining their social distance. Over time, Go said, it got better.

However, she said, she was disappointed that neither the building management nor the board had posted any specific regulations other than sharing the CDC guidelines with the resident.

"The CDC doesn't give out specific instructions on how many people can be in the laundry room or in the elevator," said Go, an 11-year resident of the building. "Each building's board should set their own rules."

Fred Yaeger, a resident at Riverwatch Condominium in Yonkers, said he was pleased with the steps being taken by his building's residents' association.

"The building is doing very well by the residents," he said. "They are cleaning the building many times during the day. And they remind residents to carry out social distancing."

Yaeger, who runs a public relations agency and has been working from home, continued: "When one of my daughters came to drop off food the other day, she left it in the lobby. I couldn't hug her, but that's the reality these days."

Pierre Beauport, the head of the residents' association at Riverwatch, said certain restrictions placed on the residents in the 14-story, 65-unit building, had not met with any push back.

For instance, last week, the building instituted a policy saying the elevator could not be used by more than two people at a time unless they were all from the same family.

"We've stepped up our cleaning. We had an outside company come in a couple of times last week just to supplement the work that the building super and porters are doing," said Beauport. "Just to keep our residents feeling at ease."

Beauport said changes had also been made to the way package deliveries are handled.

Previously, all packages were received by the concierge who would then place notices in residents' mailboxes. Residents would then pick up and sign for their packages from the concierge.

"We have temporarily suspended the resident signature requirement. Now the packages are placed in an area of the lobby away from the front desk to enforce social distancing. The concierge notes the time and date of pickup in the log book." said Beauport. "So we try to limit as such close contact as possible."

Ginsburg Development Companies, which manages rental properties in Westchester and Rockland counties, has approved an outside cleaner, said Brian Dashnaw, director of operations for the company.

"We have an outside company that does a deep clean in all the common areas in all our buildings once a week for every property," said Dashnaw, who manages 1,400 units.

In addition, they've halted all in-person apartment tours for prospective renters.

"We are heavily utilizing virtual tours right now or an agent will show the apartment to a prospective tenant through FaceTime," he said.

Dashnaw said they are dissuading people from letting in visitors.

"Obviously, we can't restrict anyone, but we can increase awareness."

Go, the health care worker from White Plains, said she was thinking of taking matters into her own hands and posting specific instructions.

"I know a lot of people in the building," she said. "And I don't want to cause any drama, but there are a lot of elderly people in our building and I want everyone to be safe."

Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy covers women and power for the USA Today Network Northeast. Click here for her latest stories. Follow her on Twitter at @SwapnaVenugopal. Support local journalism; go to lohud.com/specialoffer to find out how.

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