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How to Feel Safe in Your Apartment

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Safety has always been a top concern for renters and they're willing to pay more for security, even in tough economic times.

Landlords who make security a priority can boost their reputation, keep tenants longer, protect property values and reduce maintenance and repair costs, says Dave Rowe, executive director of the International Crime Free Association, which conducts safety seminars for apartment owners.

This is even more important now as vacant and foreclosed homes dot neighborhoods, local governments cut budgets and more former homeowners need to rely on landlords.

"Crime is our No. 1 business issue," says Brent Sobol, the owner of The TORO Properties, which owns and operates about 1,300 Atlanta apartments. "I'm in the trenches everyday."

Nationally, violent crime and property crime in the first half of the year were down about 4 percent and 6 percent, respectively, from the first half of 2008, according to preliminary figures from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Still, apartments are 85 percent more likely to be burglarized than other housing, according to the National Crime Prevention Council.

Sobol has trimmed trees at his communities, improved lighting in parking lots and walkways, started a monthly neighborhood watch meeting and hired security personnel to patrol the premises. He's also experimenting with Internet-based wireless video cameras installed at entrances and in common areas.

He spends nearly $14,000 a month on security personnel alone for 750 units. Armed security guards cost $20 an hour while off-duty police officers run between $40-$45 per hour.

"If you don't pay for it, then your properties will be overtaken by quality of life crime," like graffiti, minor theft, vandalism and trespassing, Sobol says.

But with vacancy rising and rents falling in many markets, some landlords may have to reduce staff or marketing or cut resident programs to keep security a top priority, Sobol said. This year his company cut bonuses because operating expenses have been so high.

The trade off may be worth it.

A nonscientific sampling of users by Apartments.com this year found renters were more anxious about their safety than just three years ago. "Security plays a huge role in where renters decide to live," says Tammy Kotula, a spokeswoman for Apartments.com. "And we found that people will pay more to feel safe."

When looking for an apartment, renters should ask upfront what landlords are doing to ensure apartment safety. At the very least, each unit should have windows and doors with locks and a peephole. Some states and cities require that by law.

Find out if the landlord runs background checks on tenants and if there's a neighborhood watch program. Are there security cameras, a doorman and adequate lighting in parking lots and walkways?

The landlord is only responsible for what is printed in the lease, so read it carefully before signing, says Peggy Abkemeier, Rent.com's general manager. If you want something taken care of before you move in, make sure that's added to the lease.

Don't be passive about your security and leave it to your landlord. Here are some things you can do:

-- Never buzz anyone into the building you don't know. The same applies to holding the door for someone entering when you leave the building.

-- Buy timers for lighting, radios and televisions to create a sense someone is home when you're not.

-- If your apartment doesn't come with an in-unit security system, invest in affordable but effective security technologies like mini-entry alarms, wireless door chimes or motion sensors. These can range from $10 to $40.

-- Use scare tactics like putting up window decals advertising an alarm system or a "Beware of Dog" sign.

-- Have the landlord change the locks before you move in, so you are the only key-holder to the apartment. Make sure one of your locks is a dead bolt.