



# Utica National Risk Management Alert

## Protecting Your Property during Coronavirus-Related Closures

With the current public health emergency in the country, local, state and federal governments are mandating aggressive social distancing controls and closure of non-essential services and businesses, all to slow the spread of the coronavirus and related coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Due to these government mandates, businesses are temporarily suspending physical operations and implementing work-from-home protocols. One of the results is vacant properties.

Vacant properties present unique loss exposures due to fire, theft, vandalism and severe weather. For example, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reported that from 2011-2015, U.S. fire departments responded to an estimated average of 30,200 structure fires per year in vacant properties. These fires resulted in \$710 million in direct property damage per year (NFPA, 2018).

Property owners and business operators should implement controls to avoid losses related to any such vacant properties. The following best practices will help you protect your business or property and reduce your liability.

- **Fire** – Fires can spread quickly, and there may be a delay in reporting because the building is unoccupied. Ensure that your fire protection and fire alarm systems are maintained in good working condition. These include fire sprinkler systems, standpipe systems, fixed fire extinguishing systems (dry chemical, foam, etc.) and fire detection/alarm systems (smoke, heat, etc.).

Don't forget to keep your central station monitoring services active. Maintaining central station supervision for all systems (i.e., water flow detector, smoke detectors, heat detectors, fire alarms, burglary alarms, etc.) is essential as these services notify emergency personnel (i.e., 911) when a fire is detected.

- **Vandalism and Theft** – Unoccupied facilities are easy targets for arson, vandalism, trespassing or burglary and may attract those looking for shelter or a place for criminal activities. Businesses should take steps to prevent unauthorized persons from gaining access to the property. However, it is important that access for firefighters and police is maintained.

Preventive steps include locking all doors, windows, and openings; limiting access to key personnel; limiting access points to the property and facility; posting "No Trespassing" signage; ensuring intrusion alarms and security cameras (if present) remain operational and any associated monitoring services continue. The building exterior should be well lit at all times.

You should also ensure that any roof access points are secured to guard against unauthorized personnel gaining access and fall injuries.

- **Utilities** – It is important to keep electricity turned on so that alarm systems, lighting and cameras continue to function. Electricity is also vital for operation of emergency exit signs and emergency lighting. If you have a property protected by a sprinkler system, ensure water service continues. Properly shut down any non-essential equipment or systems and disconnect them wherever feasible.

Ensure the phone or other communication system remains operational if you have a fire or security system with central station monitoring.

- **Severe Weather** – If the utilities are shut off, the building is more susceptible to temperature fluctuations, which can lead to potential damage. Keep thermostats set to avoid freezing pipes in cold climates. If fire sprinkler systems are present, a minimum temperature of 50 degrees Fahrenheit should be maintained to keep those systems in good working condition. Inspect pipes that enter through exterior walls to ensure they are adequately insulated to help prevent them from freezing.

If the domestic water lines are separate from the fire protection lines, shut off and drain the water lines to prevent potential damage from leaks and/or freezing pipes.

Consider cooling materials, equipment or appliances that could be affected by excessive heat.

- **Notification** – Notify the local authorities, including the police and fire department, that your business is closed and your property is unoccupied. They should be aware of how to access the building in case of an emergency. Provide keys or access codes to allow them to gain access in an emergency.

You should also notify them about the location of water supply valves, sprinkler controls, security system controls and utility shutoffs.

- **Periodic Inspections** – Regular inspections should be completed to ensure the controls remain in place. The inspection should focus on security, fire protection/detection systems, maintenance and overall condition. It is recommended that inspections be completed at least weekly.

While nothing is guaranteed to prevent all losses, doing nothing increases the chance of a significant property or liability loss.

**For additional information visit [www.uticanational.com](http://www.uticanational.com) or contact your local risk management representative.**

© 2020 by the Utica Mutual Insurance Company, all rights reserved.

*This material may not be copied, reproduced or distributed in any fashion, print or electronically, in whole or part, without the express permission of the Company. The information contained in this publication has been developed from sources believed to be reliable. It should not, however, be construed or relied upon as legal advice and Utica National accepts no legal responsibility for its correctness or for its application to specific factual situations.*