



Chuck Garneau, RCM
Regional Manager
Times Property Management

Criminals Live in Condos Too

Most days, life in a condo management office is mundane. Process invoices, solicit quotations, prepare board meeting packages; the list goes on. But every so often, your day goes sideways. And it frequently involves crime and the police.

One of the few times that we get the opportunity to look inside a unit is during fan coil maintenance. We don't want to intrude on someone's privacy, but it is a good time to check for loose balcony panels or see anything suspicious. We have found fully outfitted gambling units complete with poker tables, big-screen TVs for off-track-betting and even a bedroom with three beds. I recall one unit where the father

taught his kids mathematics by writing the formulas on the walls.

However, my most memorable experience involved a "roof leak."

My superintendent accompanied the techs, and I reminded them, "Have a quick look around without prying, and call me if there is any concern."

I didn't get through my morning email before the radio crackled, "Chuck, you better come up to 2311. I think we have a roof leak."

I walked into the unit and followed the super to the bedroom, where a pillar was covered with watermarks, and the closet ceiling was saturated with tiny droplets. Naively, I reached up and touched the droplets. They felt like the sugar on a

glazed donut, not like rainwater from a roof leak. I looked down and saw several bags of caustic soda. It seemed rather odd but didn't ring any bells.

I returned to my office and googled "caustic soda." The first hit brought up a YouTube video of a homemade bomb using a 2-litre coke bottle, some water and caustic soda. I called the police. They were not sure but said they would send someone anyway.

I returned to the unit and asked everyone to leave. I took pictures of the closet and its contents. Singularly focused on the caustic soda, I failed to notice several bottles of "water" and a box of sex toys. I put a guard on the door.

Within minutes, the parking lot was





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full of firetrucks, a hazmat team and several police cruisers. After showing the fire chief what we found, he came back and said, "Our chemical people say that caustic soda is a cleaning agent and would make sense if the resident was in industrial cleaning. The fire department left as the first police officer on scene walked over and said, "The drug squad will be here shortly."

The detectives followed me to the floor, opened a case and removed some detection equipment which immediately started making a clicking noise. I looked at him and jokingly said, "That can't be good." He smiled and said, "It is not good." The unit was sealed a few minutes later, and an armed officer was posted outside the unit door. Nothing more would happen until the police had a warrant.

We had found a drug lab. More importantly, there were clear signs of an explosion, explaining the droplets.

While we waited for the warrant, I gathered owner and resident information. The unit was leased from the owner. No information was given to the police until the warrant was received. In the next few hours, paramedics in hazmat suits attended to any police officers affected by the fumes. The town building inspector arrived to post an "Unsafe to Occupy" notice. The police started to gather evidence inside the unit.

If you need to know something, they will tell you. Giving them their space will earn their respect. By now, the main lobby was full of residents curious to know what was going on. I made sure everyone knew the police "incident" was isolated to a single unit, and most importantly, there was no personal danger to anyone. I encouraged everyone to return to their normal routine, but that request was lost in the glow of flashing lights. I also sent a brief email to the board alerting them of the situation.

Residents need to know what is going on. This is their home. It is equally important to resist the urge to give out "all the gory details." The privacy of the unit residents is still important, regardless of the fact they are suspects in a major criminal investigation. Make sure the building residents know they are safe.

Later that night, the tenant drove by 12 police cruisers to get to her parking spot and was promptly arrested. This was my second most favourite part of

the story. What was she thinking, knowing she lived in a drug lab unit?

I busied myself gathering video footage and door entry reports as requested by the police. The next morning, the lead detective dropped by my office to update me on the situation. He informed me they had contacted the owner, who advised the unit was rented and that the owner had no idea what his tenants were doing. I smiled and replied, "Really? Well, I have video of the unit owner walking across the parking garage carrying several bags of caustic soda." This was my favourite moment of the incident. The detective replied, "You just made the case for me." He shared the fact they had found six bottles of the finished product, GHB, a well-known date-rape drug.

The water was not water. Everything has the potential to be evidence. Don't touch anything and introduce your fingerprints into the investigation.

Most condo security systems overwrite video in a couple of weeks. You never know what video clip will add another piece to the puzzle. Over the next few days, police and lab techs came and went. The police issued a press release without mentioning me.

Help when possible but shun the limelight. A few weeks later, Public Works Canada attended with a court order and seized the unit, as it was used in the commission of a crime. The unit had to be gutted and rebuilt to mitigate the drug explosion damage.

This story would not be complete without the involvement of the resident-busy-body. Every condo has that one person who has to stick his nose into everyone's business. This time he took it to a new level. A few days after the incident, he came up to me and said, "I knew about everything before you did." I smiled and said, "You might want to ask the police who placed the initial call."

Some days are more interesting than others, and if someone tells you they have seen it all, just smile and walk away. ■

Chuck Garneau, RCM, is a Regional Manager with Times Property Management and a subject matter expert assisting CMRAO with developing the property management competencies and licensing exams.
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