

Vacant Building Loss Prevention Best Practices

Vacant properties are susceptible to a unique set of hazards that should be considered and addressed to avoid losses.

Occupants are often the eyes and ears of the agency, reporting items of concern before they become larger incidents. For example, the small leak that turns into major water damage or the broken thermostat that leads to frozen pipes. Without employees on the premises providing day-to-day monitoring that naturally mitigates common hazards, agencies must make a concerted effort to inspect vacant properties on a regular basis.

While having a vacant property isn't an ideal situation, public agencies may find themselves with facilities that don't have a current occupant. In this document, you will find practical steps that can help reduce the liability until the building is occupied again.

A first step in mitigating the different liability exposures for vacant properties is to consider the following factors:

Fire

Fires can spread quickly and there may be a delay in reporting because the building is unoccupied. Individuals seeking shelter may have open fires for cooking meals or providing heat. Fire could also start due to smoking trespassers, arsonists, decayed wiring or drug production.

Vandalism and Theft

Unoccupied facilities can be an easy target for arson, vandalism, trespassing or burglary. Vacant properties may attract those looking for shelter or a place for criminal activities. Common theft issues include lead, copper (HVAC, electrical or plumbing), and other valuable fixtures.

Environment and Severe Weather

If the utilities have been shut off to a vacant property, the building can become more susceptible to temperature (either heat or cold) fluctuations which can lead to potential damage.

Below you will find best practices to reduce vacant property liability.

Have a Plan:

Before making the decision to vacate a building it is best to have a plan in place. The plan should cover the entire process including the move, shutting down the facility properly and determining the long term plan for the property. Conduct a comprehensive risk assessment to determine where to focus your efforts. Consider how long the property will be vacant. Do you plan to occupy the facility again, sell, or depreciate? It is best to have a plan in place that will inform the following steps in the process.

Notification:

Upon vacating a building it is important to notify the local authorities, including police and fire departments. Local authorities will need to be aware of any issues around accessing the building including security measures and keyholders in case of an emergency. They should also be informed about the location of fire water supplies and whether these and/or sprinklers have been disconnected. Preferably this would be conducted as part of a pre-planning visit with the local fire department.

This is also a good opportunity to ensure the property schedule for this location is accurate and up-to-date.

Periodic Inspections:

Conduct frequent (weekly) inspections of all areas of the property. Use a checklist like the sample attached that ensures a thorough inspection is completed. The inspection should focus on security, fire protection systems, and maintenance. The checklist should include an area for comments or to provide additional information or observations not part of the form. The inspection process also needs to feed into some form of follow-up action or remediation if the observations made during inspection require it. The entire process should be well documented and the records filed.

Secure the Perimeter:

Agencies should take steps to prevent unauthorized persons from gaining access to the property. However, it is important that access for fire fighters and police is not unduly impaired. Preventive steps include:

- Security fencing, barriers or plants with thorns
- Locking all doors, windows, and openings
- Limiting access points to the property and facility
- Block parking lot entrances to prevent vehicles and pedestrians from entering
- Include “No Trespassing” signage to prevent “permissive use” arguments
- Intrusion alarms should be provided on doors and include motion detection
- Video cameras should be installed and strategically located on both the exterior and interior of the facility

Lighting:

A well-lit property will deter crime by increasing the perceived risk of detection. Installing automatic exterior lighting will help ensure the lights are on only in the evening and off

when not necessary. It is important to have lighting throughout the property and not just access points and walkways.

Utilities:

It is important to keep electricity turned on so that alarms and lighting can function including emergency exit signs and emergency lighting. Agencies should carefully consider if there are other building services or utilities that are non-essential and can be discontinued such as gas or janitorial services. Properly shut down any non-essential equipment or systems and disconnect to the greatest extent possible.

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. If the water cannot be disconnected from the fire protection lines or the agency chooses not to shut off the water, installing a monitored electronic leak detection system for the main domestic water line will help mitigate problems. Where possible turn off the water supply to individual fixtures such as sinks and toilets.

If the property does not have fire protection systems, an alternative is to shut the water supply off, ensure lines are drained, and add anti-freeze where needed to avoid bursting pipes.

Climate/Temperature:

Keep the thermostat set to avoid freezing pipes in cold climates. If fire suppression systems are present, a minimum temperature (50 degrees Fahrenheit) should be set to keep those systems in good working condition. A temperature alarm connected to a central station monitoring service would alert if the temperature drops below this threshold. Pipes that enter through exterior walls should be insulated to help prevent pipes from freezing.

If there are materials, equipment or appliances that could be affected by excessive heat, you might also consider cooling (air conditioning) needs of the facility.

Address Maintenance Issues Quickly:

Monitor the property on a regular basis (weekly) and resolve issues such as:

- Painting over graffiti
- Repairing broken windows. Break-resistant replacements or film should be considered if broken windows are common.
- Clean up of any litter/trash
- Take care of landscaping, maintaining shrubs, trees, foliage to eliminate and/or minimize blind spots and hiding places, as well as reducing the risk of fire. Well-kept landscaping, including lawns, show that the owner is still monitoring the property and on-site periodically
- Repairing broken lighting and replace bulbs
- Maintaining pest control services
- If the property has sidewalks or areas used by the public, safe walking surfaces should be maintained, including leaf, snow and ice removal

Clean Up:

Hazardous and flammable materials should be removed from the property. These include:

- Pollutants, chemicals or combustible materials which will prevent explosion, leaks, seepage or contamination. These materials could also affect first responders and those who have to enter the building in an emergency situation.
- Containers that might be attractive for trash or hazardous waste dumping such as used motor oil or chemicals.
- Combustible materials and other ignition sources such as fixtures, furniture and equipment which may also reduce fire hazards.

Neighborhood Watch:

Community involvement is important! Neighbors and businesses near the property have an interest in keeping the entire area safe as well. Letting those in the area know the property is vacant means that they will know that they shouldn't expect to see anyone coming or going. They should be advised to alert your agency if they see any activity (suspicious or not) and provide them with the best contact information.

Anonymous Reporting:

A way for individuals to report information to your agency about the property without providing a name may provide useful information. Communicating information about the reporting tool and how to use it in the area around the property is essential to getting utilization.

Watch/Guard Service

An effective solution is to hire security personnel assigned to the property to monitor for any security threat (vandals, trespassers, etc.). They can make a huge difference in potential loss to a vacant facility. The degree of security depends on the location and vulnerability of the structure from loss due to potential intruders, homeless or vandals. For example, downtown structures are particularly vulnerable to homeless people accessing the property for shelter.

Automatic Fire-Protection System:

Automatic fire-protection systems include traditional fire sprinkler systems, standpipe systems, as well as fixed fire extinguishing systems (dry chemical, foam, etc.). It is critical that the system is maintained in good working condition with adequate water supply. Automatic sprinklers should be left operational.

Fire Alarm System:

Fire alarm systems detect a fire (certain heat threshold) and alert with an audible and visual notification system. It includes automatic detection, water flow alarms, valve tamper alarms, and smoke detection.

Burglary Alarm/System:

A burglary alarm monitors entrances/exits and windows for intrusion and can help protect against unauthorized entrance to the building.

Central Station Monitoring System:

This integrates fire and burglary systems and notifies emergency personnel (911 dispatcher) as necessary. Maintaining central station supervision for all systems (i.e. water flow detector, smoke detectors, heat detectors, fire alarms, burglary alarms, etc.) is essential. This system should be checked regularly (monthly) to test alarms and confirm receipt of signals.

For non-sprinklered buildings, fire detection systems should protect the entire building and be connected to an FM and/or UL-listed central station monitoring service.

Vacant Building Inspection Checklist

Security

Description	Yes	No
Doors and windows are in good condition and locked		
Roof hatches and vents are properly secured		
Perimeter fence shows no sign of breaches		
Gates are chained and locked		
Burglar alarms are in service		
Security alarm company regularly tests alarms and confirms receipt of signals		
Comments:		

Fire Protection Systems

Description	Yes	No
Automatic sprinkler system is in good working condition		
Fire protection systems are inspected and tested per NFPA 25		
Automatic sprinkler system pressure gauge(s) indicate adequate pressure		
Water supply is in service		
All fire protection valves are locked in the open position		
All fire alarms (waterflow, valve tamper, smoke detectors, and heat detectors) are in service		
Fire alarm company regularly tests alarms and confirms receipt of signals		
Sprinkler heads are free from obstructions		
Fire doors are closed		
Standpipe system is operational		
Standpipe hose is in place and in good condition		
Fire Department Connection (FDC) is free from obstruction		
Hydrants are in good conditions and are accessible		
Comments:		

Maintenance

Description	Yes	No
Exterior lighting is in good working order		
Exterior is free of litter/trash		
Interior is free of litter/trash		

Description	Yes	No
Building inspected for any sign of vandalism/graffiti		
Building inspected for any sign of intrusion/breach		
Roof inspected including roof drains and scuppers		
Building heating system is in good working order		
Temperature alarm is in service, regularly tested and confirmed receipt of alert signals		
Lawn and landscaping are adequately trimmed		
Inspect plumbing connections and fittings for signs of leaks and/or corrosion		
No signs of pests		
Sidewalks and areas used by the public are in good working condition		
Comments:		