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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT
OFFICE FOR DRUG-FREE NEIGHBORHOODS



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DRUGS IN HOUSING: WHAT MANAGERS CAN DO

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DRUGS IN HOUSING: WHAT MANAGERS CAN DO

by Charles S. Wilkins, Jr.

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The National Housing Partnership owns over 500 apartment properties in 39 states, totalling over 80,000 units. Having confronted the drug problem at several properties (not always successfully), we discovered that there are no experts and no guaranteed methods. We also found that we needed to pool what little knowledge we had. I hope the following ideas will be helpful to you and your properties.

FIRST, UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM

Total illegal drug sales in the United States in 1988 are estimated at \$150 billion, roughly equal to the amount spent on new single family housing construction. Many Americans, most of them white male middle class adults, use illegal drugs regularly.

The business is very profitable. It does not require sophisticated technology or elaborate organization. The penalties for getting caught are not severe, and the chances of getting caught are fairly low. Despite the high risk of being killed or severely injured by other drug traffickers, many Americans choose to manufacture and distribute illegal drugs. Although most users of illegal drugs are middle class or above, those who manufacture and distribute the drugs tend to come from lower income groups and reside in lower income areas.

The social factors which cause some Americans to purchase and use illegal drugs, and the factors which cause other Americans to manufacture and distribute these drugs, are the same problems which have baffled our national leaders for generations:

- . the nuclear threat, which makes people feel they may have no future;
- . the tendency of our economy, particularly in recent years, to widen the gap between wealthy and poor Americans, dampening hopes for upward mobility;
- . the persistence of poverty and racism, which similarly reduce many Americans' hopes for legitimate success;
- . our modest success in desegregating middle class housing, which has removed many role models from minority communities; and
- . the Third World's economic problems, which force farmers in South America to grow coca in order to feed their families.

The root causes of the drug problem are very deeply imbedded. As a result, we are plagued with an extensive, violent and decentralized criminal population which threatens the stability of our society. Moreover, there is no real likelihood that the situation will improve anytime soon. There are no easy solutions: legalization, which "solved" a similar problem in the 1930's, is not a viable option, because the drugs are simply too dangerous, and too destructive of human potential.

Here are a few things we can do to help solve the drug problem itself:

1. We can have drug free families, drug free businesses, and drug free social relationships. We have to be willing, if necessary, to sever relationships with those who use illegal drugs, and with those who sell them.
2. We can press for local tax increases for enhanced law enforcement activities. The levels of police presence which sufficed five years ago are not enough today. Our streets are not safe, and we have to be willing to pay our share to make sure they become safe again.
3. We can support drug education efforts in our local schools.
4. We can support politicians who are serious about solving the drug problem.

Our immediate task, however, is to recognize that the drug problem will be with us for some time, and to find ways to keep it away from our properties.

DISCOURAGING THE DRUG TRADE

Drug dealers, like other retailers, want locations which are easy for customers to find, with convenient access, and with features which place customers at ease. They want their businessplace organized for efficiency, so they can generate maximum sales with minimum costs.

The ideal drug trafficking location is convenient to one or more busy streets, with good drive-through access for customers, plenty of lookout stations, several escape routes, minimal lighting, lots of litter into which drugs and firearms can be thrown in an emergency, and minimal presence of police (or anyone who might be likely to call the police).

Does this sound like one of your properties? If so, you probably have drug activity already.

Here are some physical changes which may help:

1. Increase exterior lighting. Use efficient fixtures with vandal-proof covers, mounted well above the ground.
2. Eliminate escape routes for vehicles, using card-access gates, and blocking off unnecessary entrances (particularly at night).

3. Eliminate escape routes for foot traffic, by installing fencing and other barriers. Local fire code officials may permit you to block off rear breezeway entrances.
4. Eliminate lookout posts. Second and third floor common hallway windows are favorite spots; you can remove the windows and cover them over with siding or brick. Berms and small hills can be removed.
5. Secure all laundry rooms, basements, and storage rooms after business hours: use metal doors, metal jambs, heavy duty hinges and first class locks.
6. Pick up the litter, several times per day if necessary.

MAKE SURE YOUR STAFF IS NOT PART OF THE PROBLEM

According to national estimates, ten percent of all workers have substance abuse problems. Isn't it interesting that none of these problem employees work for you?

In fact, some of them do work for you, but how can you tell? Your most likely clue is decreased performance. Employees who have substance abuse problems are:

- . 3.0 times more likely to report late for work;
- . 2.2 times more likely to request to leave early;
- . 2.5 times more likely to have absences of 8 days or more;
- . 3.0 times greater users of sick benefits;
- . 5.0 times more likely to file a workers compensation claim; and
- . 3.6 times more likely to be involved in an accident,

when compared to other employees. They are also likely to withdraw from existing social and family relationships, and from normal responsibilities.

Do you know what drug paraphernalia look like? Do you know what the drugs themselves look like? More importantly, do your supervisory employees know? Here is a short list of physical signs of crack cocaine use:

1. Quantities of burnt matches - crack requires very high temperatures before it begins to smoke, and generally does not stay lit once it begins to smoke.
2. Glass straws roughly three to four inches long, often with a small piece of Brillo near one end - for smoking crack.
3. Aluminum beer or soft drink cans, flattened and punctured with several small holes on one side - for smoking crack.

4. Very small (roughly one inch square) zip-lock bags, or small glass vials - crack is often sold in these containers. Decorations on the bags, and stopper color, indicate which dealer manufactured the drug.
5. Squares of aluminum foil - crack is often wrapped in aluminum foil, particularly in the Midwest and West.
6. Baking soda boxes and metal tea strainers - presence of these items indicates manufacturing of crack.

For more information, call the community relations officer at your local police department, and ask for training.

In most NHP properties which had drug problems, at least one staff member was involved in the drug activities. Your property is not likely to be an exception.

Develop a drug-free workplace program, including counseling and treatment options for employees with substance abuse problems.

START TODAY

We found that properties can go from "no problem" to "out of control" in only a few months. We also found that preventive measures cost much, much less than curative measures. You cannot afford to wait until you have a problem.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE VERY HEAVY DRUG ACTIVITY ALREADY?

You must step in and regain control of the property, and it will be expensive. If you wait, residents will move out, and the property will face almost certain financial failure.

The first requirement is to do extensive property-wide unit inspections and verification of leaseholders and their dependents. If a property has a severe drug problem, photo identifications may be needed to control who, in fact, is occupying a particular unit.

The second requirement is intensive guard patrol, to discourage drug dealers and customers from entering the property, and to protect the property itself. At minimum, this means two guards patrolling together, 5 PM until 3 AM on weekdays and 24 hours per day on weekends and holidays. The cost of this level of service is usually at least \$10,000 per month. Many properties require more guards, around the clock coverage, or both.

Fortunately, this level of patrol is not required forever; when the drug dealers have left, the level of coverage can be decreased somewhat. However, once intensive patrol is initiated, it may be a long time before a guard presence is no longer needed.

Off duty police have full arrest powers, but are more expensive than private guard services. Whichever type of service you use, you need detailed, written guidelines covering the exact services desired, including reports, and how the guards are to respond to various situations. You should also review carefully the insurance and legal aspects of retaining the guard service.

The third requirement is to obtain the maximum feasible level of control over who enters and exits the buildings. Full control is relatively simple if there is only one building entrance, and next to impossible if the property consists of several buildings scattered over a wide area.

You will also need to improve lighting, cut off escape routes, and eliminate lookout posts. Since the problem is severe, you may have to be heavy-handed with these measures. This adds to the expense, and may actually decrease the property's curb appeal, but the issue is survival, not aesthetics.

The bottomline in taking these steps is to make life difficult for drug dealers and drug users on your property. If they're too hassled, they'll go someplace else. In the bigger picture, communities need to address these steps together in order to remove the drug problem.

THE EVICTION OPTION

Much of the effort from the industry and from HUD has been directed toward evicting residents who participate in drug related activities, or who permit drug related activities in or around their apartments.

This approach is not as useful as one might think:

1. Many dealers are not parties to the lease; they in effect sublease the apartment, or are merely guests. Standard eviction processes are not equipped to handle these situations.
2. Many local court systems insist on a drug related conviction before taking action. We are hopeful that HUD's initiatives will convince these courts that lesser standards of proof are acceptable for eviction proceedings.
3. Many local court systems will not evict an entire household because of one member's involvement in drug trafficking. Our experience is that the entire household must go in order to stop the problem.

However, residents who are involved in drug related activities are likely to violate a number of other lease provisions, and these non-drug violations are often very effective grounds for eviction.

Although good managers will pursue evictions of households which violate the lease agreement, managers should not rely on eviction as their primary drug prevention technique.

THE BEST PREVENTIVE MEASURE

Many problem properties develop drug activity only after months or years of other problems: inadequate cash flow, poor resident profile, poor construction, high management turnover or inadequate management personnel. This makes sense, because drug dealers will naturally avoid properties with strong management presence and strong resident pride.

So, the best insurance against drug problems is to do your job, fully and completely, every day. Treat residents and applicants as valued customers. Develop and use rigorous screening and qualification procedures. Maintain the property the way you would if you lived there. Insist that residents comply with the lease agreement, and be sure you uphold your end of the agreement also. Inspect the property frequently, including the interiors of occupied apartments. Do preventive maintenance.

Stay in touch with residents: determine their needs, and meet those needs. Work with resident leaders, and listen to them. Your residents are your most valuable allies in discouraging drug related activity. Ask for their help, and be prepared to meet some requests from them in exchange. Because of the potential voting strength of resident groups, resident leaders are often more effective with local government officials than managers or owners.

A united and satisfied resident population will be worth more to your property than any amount of fences, guards and gates. But start now; if you wait until you have a problem, only the high cost options will be available.

As conscientious owners and managers have always known, it is more cost effective (as well as more satisfying) to give every property high quality management, and every resident high quality service, every day.

Good luck and good management!

For copies of materials developed by NHP, or to share your ideas, write to the NHP Drug Task Force at 11410 Isaac Newton Square North, Suite 203, Reston, Virginia 22090.