

COVID-19 and HDFCs in New York City

By Rachel D. Jaffe

As you have heard relentlessly over the past week or two, there is increased concern that COVID-19, aka novel coronavirus, will become a pandemic. The likelihood of “community spread” is now only a question of when and how. Current events raise questions and concerns for HDFC buildings, which are typically multifamily apartment complexes housing all kinds of persons, including older persons and those with compromised immune systems, in close proximity to families including young children. Shareholders may have concerns about how their HDFC community should address the virus. Empowerment comes from collective action and collective responsibility. Working with your neighbors on a common goal can bolster everyone during this difficult time.

One of the best things HDFCs can do right now is to open lines of communication with all occupants via email, notes left on doors, or the telephone—no gatherings or any in-person meetings under these circumstances. Then, HDFCs should disseminate common-sense guidelines among all HDFC residents. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website has a variety of posters that HDFCs can hang up in prominent locations around the building to promote best practices among residents. Precautions for the prevention of COVID-19 include:

- Wash hands often with soap and water for a minimum of 20 seconds or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue away.

People with existing disabilities (asthma, respiratory disease, HIV, diabetes, etc.) may be more susceptible to COVID-19. If a neighbor with pre-existing conditions lives in your HDFC, make sure to be particularly sensitive to any requests or concerns they may have about the HDFC’s response measures.

Part of taking on COVID-19 prevention is framing it as a collective responsibility. Assign regular, rotating tasks to shareholders during this period. Even if you don’t live in a self-managed building, giving individuals tasks makes everyone morally responsible for the consequences. For example, ask neighbors to volunteer to disinfect high-touch surfaces--such as the front doorknob, mailboxes, elevator buttons, light switches and stair rails--with bleach or ammonia wipes or alcohol solution. Provide hand sanitizer to residents by installing wall-mounted, refillable pumps in common rooms and near building entrances and ask volunteers to refill the pumps periodically.

Another aspect of these measures is how to increase the frequency of cleanings within your building without raising costs. Adding deep cleaning tasks means paying your porter or super additional wages. Consider decreasing other services to maintain current maintenance costs since many shareholders are likely feeling financial strain now. Additional cleaning measures should focus on sanitizing surfaces, taking residents’ garbage out of the building as quickly as

possible and laundering or deep cleaning soft (porous) surfaces such as rugs and drapes in any common spaces.

HDFCs may choose to only continue to conduct repair and maintenance work under emergency circumstances. The reasons to reduce construction now are both to avoid bringing more people—such as contractors—into contact with residents and to preserve a peaceful, quiet environment for residents who are home now during typical work hours.

The chance of spreading the virus is lowered drastically when people reduce their in-person interactions with others. So, to the extent possible, HDFCs must counsel their residents to commit to social distancing at home and when they're outside of the building. Individuals' choices about socializing directly impact the rest of the HDFC.

A method for communicating precautionary guidance is to post signs indicating that people should avoid gathering in the building's common areas—hallways, lobby, laundry room, basement, roof deck—where the virus can spread. Consider circulating a list of shareholders' email addresses and phone numbers to ease communication from apartment to apartment without face-to-face contact. Some HDFCs are even temporarily locking up community rooms, gyms and entertainment rooms and canceling all shareholder social events immediately.

Furthermore, some buildings are asking residents to limit the deliveries sent to the building to decrease the number of delivery personnel accessing the vestibule or lobby and also to limit the number of boxes and parcels handled by multiple people from entering the building. Some HDFCs are enabling residents to pay maintenance electronically, instead of having to collect paper checks or money orders, by establishing a bank account that can receive digital payments via an online network. In short, slowing the spread of the virus depends on individuals taking collective actions, even if such actions are inconvenient or annoying.

The CDC also recommends that anyone should stay home if they feel sick. Post signs telling residents that if they do become sick, they should stay inside of their apartments, minimize contacts with other people, and follow the advice of their doctors and local public health agencies.

If you become aware that a resident has the virus and/or is subject to quarantine, you should not publicize it without that person's permission as to protect their privacy. Still, in the event of a confirmed case of COVID-19 in your HDFC, attempt to collaborate with the sick Shareholder to provide any necessary items, including bleach and wipes, to disinfect their apartment and any other parts of the building they may have encountered. Swift action protects the health and safety of the rest of the occupants on that person's floor and throughout the building.

Finally, check-in (safely, by maintaining physical distance) often with any elderly residents because they are likely to experience the most significant impacts of the virus. Not only do they need more help with cleaning and shopping, they may not be able to practice "social distancing" without ready access to technology such as smart phones and computers. Importantly, socializing with neighbors, family and friends is key to mental wellness. Nevertheless, face-to-face relations accelerate the spread of the virus and seniors are statistically the most vulnerable to

COVID-19. So, frequent check-ins to make sure that your older neighbors are okay is all part of moving towards the common goal of slowing the spread of the virus.

Stay current with advice from public health officials and use the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) resources <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

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