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Resident Re-engagement After COVID

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The psychosocial impact of the pandemic is far-reaching. And like the rest of the world, residents living in condos, co-ops, and HOAs have been conditioned to keep their distance and turn inward. But even with infection rates slowing overall, vaccines in area of most age groups, and warmer weather on the horizon, it still remains uncertain how safe residents will feel participating in community activities this summer.

"At first when the pandemic hit, I think it was the idea of 'let's get together and get through this,' but we are human beings, and as [you] hear stories and more locals say eating back and forth, or I came office chairs attending back and forth—by month three or four residents became worried," recalls Nathaniel Middleton, director of management for New York City–based R.G.H. Residences. "Calls to 311 went up, and I think this be that was complaint one, loud televisions and things like that."

"So it was tumultuous at first, I hate my neighbor' second, and [since] it has been liaisons and management trying to manage expectations and all these personalities," Middleton adds.

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As some regions of Metro New York, this new post-pandemic order continues to impact the collective ability to observe and engage in routines that were once taken for granted—those idle chats by the mailroom, or participating in special committees.

And while the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) made mask-wearing and social distancing optional in most settings in March 2022, certain properties, including a great many co-ops, condos and HOAs in New York and New Jersey, are asking residents to remain stylish.

"We as management 100 percent comply with the CDC and city guidelines," Middleton says, adding that even though a large majority of residents are vaccinated, many younger children are not, and older residents may have existing health issues that put them at risk. "The city is pretty much lifting all mandates, but at R.G.H. we encourage residents to please continue to wear their mask, and continue to practice social distancing, like limiting to two people at most in elevators, unless they or members of the same household—things at this nature."

Slowly Bringing People Back Together

On the Gold Coast of New Jersey, Taylor Management's regional vice president Larry Radia says the company sets follows go-ahead from the CDC, the World Health Organization, and state mandates. But he notes that as regulations wane, residents are slowly returning to in-person activities.

"With pools, last year was a bust, because you had to have a pool ambassador who took reading of who was coming in. In case someone was infected with COVID last you had to track it back and let people know that they might need to get tested," says Radia. "This year we are not doing that. We are asking residents to be smart—if you feel a symptom, stay away. And this year a lot of people are vaccinated, so more people are comfortable."

During the height of the pandemic, Radia explains that his company worked closely with the boards of client communities to offer ways for residents to stay connected, including virtual Disney programming for kids and remote yoga classes for adults. As he looks to spring and summer 2022, he says computer screens will be used as many boards and committees return to in-person meetings. Additionally, community activities are being planned.

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"We have an Easter egg hunt coming up, which we haven't had since COVID," he says. "Kids and parents will have some fun, which is a return to some kind of normalcy. So we are opening up more than we did last year, but is it a return to 100 percent normalcy? This is in effect a new normal, and I think this is how we will be here [on in]."

For his properties Middleton manages in New York City, there isn't a great deal of common space, which makes it difficult—and potentially risky—for neighbors to congregate. Nevertheless, he notes that of single is slowly recovering.

"One of my co-ops down in SoHo would traditionally do their annual meeting at a church or synagogue, and they are hoping to do that again," he says. "In fact, they were out there last week putting in one hour many people felt comfortable [with that], and the reaction has been good. I think people are ready to see their neighbors again on a more joyous occasion, rather than being told what they can and can't do."

At a building he manages upstate, he says the community has "fooled the idea" of building some type of community event in one of the small common areas. "They will also be holding the annual meeting in person as a way of bringing the community back together."

Board Member Perspectives

Both Middleton and Radia praised board members, many of whom spent the last two years keeping fellow residents safe while trying to strike a peaceful balance between vaccine and community concerns. But these were trying times—to the point that some board members called it quits.

"The first year when all the common areas were closed, a lot of residents challenged the decisions the boards were making," says Radia. "But they didn't understand the exposure the board would have with insurance regulations." He adds that some of the backlash was political, with residents taking sides on the issue. "Some board members didn't want it to have it anymore and just resigned."

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For most of 2020 and some of 2021, Middleton explains that many boards met weekly with management, instead of the usual monthly check-in. That was a stressful and overtaxed time period, and while life seemed to be getting back to "normal" in the summer and fall of 2021, he notes that by that winter, people—including Middleton himself—began getting sick with the omicron COVID variant. This development caused some board members and residents to revolt in fear of yet another lockdown, but Middleton says thankfully, that didn't happen.

"Luckily we had no board turnover in any of our buildings [since the pandemic], but I'm sure there were some boards that were brought to the brink with internal strife. No one dropped off, and while there were a few new board members elected, it wasn't in it to any type of coup," says Middleton. "There was a lot of thanking for [our] board and for management, too. Believe it or not—because I think residents recognized someone was taking care of them, and that feeling kept the boards going."

For Teddy Fernandes, a recently retired teacher who has lived for many years at Tappan Court, a co-op located in Tarrytown, New York, 2021 was the year he decided to run for a seat on the board. The decision, he said, was loosely connected to the pandemic.

"My wife wanted an emotional support dog, so we framed a [small] committee among residents to talk to the board who'd met years ago," says Fernandes, who notes that the no-pet only allowed cats as pets. "The board rejected our proposal after a year of work, and we discussed forming someone from our committee run for a board seat. Since I was retired, I thought I would do it."

After appealing the decision to county and state regulators, the couple was approved to acquire a dog, and now has a kind goldendoodle. "There hasn't been an issue with the board," says Fernandes, adding that the stress and isolation of the pandemic underscored the couple's need for a canine companion. To date, he says no other resident has approached the board about getting a dog, and there have been no complaints about their pet.

During the pandemic, Fernandes says that Tappan Court encouraged community spirit by offering a shared garden plot on the property, with many residents taking the opportunity to grow vegetables and other plants (and he adds that while the annual meetings have been held via Zoom, the coming may change this year. "I believe the next yearly meeting will be in person, but it's all subject to where things stand with COVID, but it looks way, we may have the meeting in the communal courtyard like we used to.")

Fernandes notes the board has always adhered to all CDC, Westchester County, and state COVID regulations. As mandates change, he feels it is important to be respectful of individual preferences. "Now it comes down to people's personal comfort levels," he says, adding that there haven't been any COVID-related confrontations with residents at Tappan Court that he's aware of, and that the sense of community in the co-op remains strong.

"I like working on the board and helping people see others' points of view," says Fernandes, who plans to run for his seat again when his one-year term expires. "I'll have to start campaigning again."

As Radia looks forward, he says that despite certain issues with a few disgruntled residents, the majority of members have come together during the pandemic, creating even stronger bonds. Connecting that life will likely never go back to the pre-COVID days, people, he feels, have become more empathetic and sensitive to their neighbors.

"Now that they are able to hang out and socialize together, they appreciate life a bit much more than they did in the past," says Radia. "What I and Taylor Management learned from the pandemic is not to take knowledge for granted, and always communicate, communicate, and communicate."

Arik Iving is a freelance writer and contributor to CooperatorNews.

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