

MF

MULTIFAMILY FLORIDA

SUMMER 2020

NO MORE DOGGIE DECEPTION

ESA ANTI-FRAUD BILL AMONG
2020 LEGISLATIVE WINS

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**KEEPING
RESIDENTS
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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Multifamily Industry, FAA Rise to the Occasion

BY KATIE WRENN, CAPS | WRH REALTY SERVICES INC.

2020 KICKED OFF WITH a positive economic outlook, strong job market, and steady growth in multifamily. Then in March, our world as we know it was changed forever. Businesses were shut down, not knowing if or when they would open again. All over the world, people were told to stay safe at home, as much as they could. "Home" took on a new significance, as did the apartment industry's role as essential.

We in the multifamily industry learned what we needed to do to help staff

members and residents stay safe and healthy. We instituted new processes for cleaning common areas, and learned how to connect with residents remotely. Change is a constant in property management, and we realize early on we should expect the unexpected. This was no different.

Owners and operators, suppliers, and on-site teams have learned to think outside the box. We have had to get creative to continue to provide a level of service that our residents have come to know and deserve, and that has been even more important during these times. Some changes were minor alterations to policies while others meant partnering with our suppliers to

enhance a service during a global pandemic that made social distancing necessary.

The Florida Apartment Association also had to adapt. FAA jumped into virtual learning by offering a series of free webinars on timely topics with headlining speakers such as Matt Easton, Theresa L. Kitay, Lia Nichole Smith, and Beth Ziesenis. Other webinars included legal briefings with FAA attorney members Harry Heist and Ryan McCain, and a town hall meeting with Florida House Majority Leader Dane Eagle.

While working from home, FAA staff

had daily meetings to plan and coordinate how best to serve FAA members and our industry. FAA and local affiliate association executives met weekly. Staff members in communications, education and meetings, and government affairs met with colleagues

across the state and across the nation, with a goal of continuous improvement despite trying times.

Advocacy is an important part of FAA's mission, even more so during the pandemic crisis. FAA provided a wealth of resources:

- A one-stop resource for guidance and best practices was posted on the FAA website and frequently updated with executive orders issued by the governor;

President's Message Continued on Page 4

"Change is a constant in property management, and we realize early on we should expect the unexpected. This was no different."

FAQs and sample letters that members could use to comply with these orders; information on federal relief programs; and links to resources from the National Apartment Association, the Centers for Disease Control, and more.

- The government affairs team provided real-time status updates on local government activity such as court closures, suspensions of writs of possession, shelter-in-place orders, curfews, and, eventually, reopening policies.
- FAA wrote letters to the governor urging steps to protect the state's multifamily industry through direct assistance for apartment residents struggling to pay rent, mortgage forbearance for multifamily housing providers, and other measures.
- Amanda Gill, FAA's government affairs director, and Bonnie Smetzer,

FAA immediate past president, served on a task force established by the Department of Business and Professional Regulation and presented recommendations to the governor.

- FAA sent press releases and an opinion article to newspapers and websites around the state, resulting in positive media coverage from the Panhandle to Southeast Florida.

At the same time, our local affiliate associations were stepping up with webinars, legal seminars, and online education to fill the gaps created by cancellation or postponement of in-person programs and events.

We do not know what the future holds or the full impact that COVID-19 has had or will have on our industry and our lives. We do know that it has changed the landscape of everything that we do. We have found new ways to connect with

others, and we have come together as a community for the greater good.

I am personally honored and humbled to work for such an amazing industry that has stepped up during these ever changing times as an essential workforce. We have shared ideas, strategies for navigating our new landscape, and worked with supplier partners to ensure a happy home for our residents.

I am especially proud of how FAA and our strong network of regional affiliates helped guide the membership through this challenging period. Our members are truly fortunate that in Florida, we have one of the strongest affiliate networks and a powerful state association. Our industry and our association continue to grow and improve through good times and hard times – I know that we will come through this crisis better than ever. **MF**

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Difficult Times Yield Valuable Lessons

BY JOSH GOLD, CAE, CMP | EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

OK, I'LL ADMIT IT. I've never been a big fan of working from home. Maybe I'm "old fashioned" but I've always preferred to work in an office setting and, as I've found myself managing a team of employees, I've always preferred to have them working from the office as well. Before mid-March, I'd probably not worked from home more than two or three times over the past decade.

There are a million reasons why I'd tell you that it's better for me to work from the office: I'm more productive, there are fewer distractions (that pile of laundry is calling my name as I write this), and the Wi-Fi is much, much faster! But ultimately, I think I prefer to work from the office because I'm a people person and the collaborative environment of face-to-face working energizes me in a way that working solo never will.

But, like many of your companies and communities, FAA closed its headquarters office on March 17 and the decision as to whether or not we would work from home was made for me. Employees set up work space in their homes, which became their "offices" for at least 12 weeks. With no road map to follow, no precedent to review, we found ourselves relying on trial and error to figure out processes and procedures. As an article in *Time* magazine proclaimed, "The Coronavirus Outbreak Has Become the World's Largest Work-From-Home Experiment."

It's an experiment that has yielded some valuable data, some of which can be useful in the long-term. Here are some of the lessons my team and I learned.

Figure out how you're going to communicate. From the beginning of our work-from-home status, we had "stand-up" meetings, almost every day and usually in the morning. The term "stand-up" refers to a short meeting where everyone will remain standing and

thus be more apt to stay on topic. Our stand-up meetings consisted primarily of team members reporting what they're working on, giving updates on projects, maybe asking for feedback regarding a particular challenge. But the meetings weren't all business, all the time. My team loves trivia, for example, and so we'd often close the meeting with a few fun trivia questions.

Understand that people's differences might be magnified. The varying strengths among individuals can be a huge part of what makes a team successful. When "normal" suddenly and unexpectedly undergoes a radical shift, the ebb and flow that previously characterized the team no longer works. For example, some team members might like the instantaneous communication and issue resolution of online chats or instant messages. For others, the ding that signals an incoming message can constitute an interruption to the focus they need to work.

Encourage your team to establish and stick to a schedule. Early on in the "safer at home" phase of the pandemic, Capt. Scott Kelly, FAA's 2019 annual conference keynote speaker shared lessons learned about isolation during his year in space. "You need to schedule things like work, rest, taking care of your environment — your 'space station,' whether that's the house you live in or the apartment you live in. Take time to go outside, if you can. Sunlight and nature are so very important to our health."

Be flexible. How often did we hear in the past few months that we need to "pivot"? How about "new normal" or "unprecedented times"? Changing economic and societal conditions, as well as government orders, forced all of us to change priorities. FAA pivoted by taking a leap into online learning. Despite never having provided

online education, FAA presented several successful webinars on Thursdays in April and May. These free webinars covered topics such as leasing, building community, and fair housing during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was even a webinar just for suppliers. FAA members can access recordings of the Thursday webinars at www.faaHQ.org/recorded-webinars. In addition, FAA offered legal webinars with guest speakers Harry Heist and Ryan McCain, for a total of 10 webinars over the course of seven weeks.

Be compassionate. While it may be tempting to adopt an attitude of "keep calm and carry on," you can bet your staff or your colleagues are dealing with struggles you may not be aware of. In addition to trying to work from home with children, pets, or partners underfoot, they may be truly fearful about their own health or that of family members. They may be frustrated by not being able to visit elderly family members.

Establish and respect boundaries between work and home. Technology made working remotely possible. Technology also makes it possible to be connected all the time, and that's not necessarily a good thing. When we work in an office, our commute signals the beginning and end of the work day. When working from home, we need to create that delineation, such as by taking a walk when you log off for the day. Of course, there will be times when it's necessary to work outside of your usual hours. Just make sure that the "usual hours" don't become "all the time."

By the time you read this, I expect we will be working at FAA headquarters once again. It is my hope that the lessons we learned while we were working remotely will carry through to help us all grow as individuals, and to make the FAA team more effective than ever. **MF**

NO MORE DOGGIE DECEPTION

ESA ANTI-FRAUD BILL AMONG
2020 LEGISLATIVE WINS





BY AMANDA GILL

The 2020 legislative session moved fast and furiously and when it ended on March 19, many of the Florida Apartment Association's priorities had advanced to the finish line, needing only the signature of the governor to become law. That final step across the finish line was paused, however, when Gov. Ron DeSantis turned his full attention to the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time of this writing, the state budget and many of FAA's priority bills had not been signed. One key piece of legislation two years in the making, however, was signed into law

on June 23: HB 209/SB 1084 to curb emotional support animal fraud. And although the final budget was delayed, the version passed by both houses included full funding for the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund for the first time in 13 years. Overall, 2020 was a banner year for FAA and its members.

Legislation Passes to Curb Emotional Support Animal Fraud

House Bill 209 (Rep. Sam Killebrew, R-41)/Senate Bill 1084 (Sen. Manny Diaz Jr., R-36)

FAA encouraged passage of legislation to reduce emotional support animal (ESA) fraud by establishing protections for housing providers and penalties for those who falsify documentation related to the need for an ESA.

SB 1084 was passed by both chambers unanimously and signed by the governor on June 23. When the new law goes into effect on July 1, housing providers will be able to request reliable documentation in the event an individual's disability-related need for an ESA is not readily apparent. Reliable documentation may be provided by a federal, state, or local government agency, specified healthcare practitioners, telehealth providers, or out-of-state practitioners who have provided in-person care or services to the resident on at least one occasion.

The new law also clarifies a housing provider's right to prohibit an animal if it poses a direct threat to the safety, health, or property of others. Additionally, if a person requests more than one ESA, the housing provider may request information regarding the need for each animal.

Last but certainly not least, the new law creates important penalties that will deter ESA fraud. A practitioner could face disciplinary action, be charged with a criminal misdemeanor, or both for providing documentation for an ESA without personal knowledge of the patient's disability or disability-related need or providing false or fraudulent ESA documentation.

Sadowski is Fully Funded for the First Time in 13 Years

FAA has urged the Legislature over the years to use the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund monies, which are collected via document stamp taxes on real estate transactions, exclusively for affordable housing programs as intended. Unfortunately, year after year, these funds are often diverted to other needs across the state budget. For the first time in 13 years, the state budget that was passed by both the House and Senate fully funds the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

The \$370 million in funding includes:

- \$115 million: State Apartment Incentive Loan program (SAIL) and other affordable housing programs.

- \$225 million: State Housing Initiatives Partnership program (SHIP).
- \$30 million: Hurricane Housing Recovery.

This was a significant victory for FAA and the housing industry because these funds will play a critical role in developing or renovating affordable housing across the state.

It is worth noting that the Legislature's decision to fully fund the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund could not have come at a better time in Florida's history. SHIP funds have already been used to help establish rent and mortgage relief programs at the local level across the state to assist Floridians who were experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19.

Problematic Subscribing Witness Requirement Removed

House Bill 469 (Rep. Wyman Duggan, R-15)/Senate Bill 1224 (Sen. David Simmons, R-09)

Existing state law requires two people to witness a landlord's signature on a lease for longer than one year, and to sign a statement to that effect. This "subscribing witness requirement" creates a problem because many leases are completed online. Both the House and the Senate passed HB 469, which will, if signed, remove this stumbling block for the apartment industry.

State Preempts Local Government from Establishing Rights of Nature

Senate Bill 712 (Sen. Debbie Mayfield, R-17)

Local governments across the state had been exploring the idea of establishing "Rights of Nature" ordinances, which provide certain legal rights and protections to elements in the natural environment, such as a river. Ultimately, these policies can be used to prevent development of apartment-communities in the future – especially concerning at a time when Florida has a housing shortage. During the committee process for SB 712, an environmental resource management bill, language was added to prohibit local governments from recognizing or granting certain legal rights to things in the natural environment. SB 712 passed both the House and Senate and, if signed into law, will become effective on July 1.

Other FAA Priorities See Action But Do Not Pass in 2020

Two additional FAA legislative priorities saw action during the 2020 session but, unfortunately, were not passed by the time the session ended. The FAA government affairs team will be evaluating the opportunity to address these issues for the 2021 session.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE UP?



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- **Affordable housing tax incentives.** FAA advocated for language to be added to HB 1339 or SB 998 that would have allowed counties to establish a property tax discount program for affordable housing units. FAA's tax incentive language was added to a proposed amendment for SB 998 on February 14 but was later stripped from the bill because of tax revenue concerns.
 - Although FAA's language was removed from the bill, HB 1339 was ultimately passed by both the House and Senate. Signed by the governor on June 10, this new law will enable local governments to approve the development of affordable housing on any parcel of land that is zoned for residential, commercial, or industrial use. The law would also impose additional impact fee reporting requirements on local governments and establish biannual affordable housing workshops, among other positive changes.
 - FAA also worked to address industry concerns related to linkage fees in HB 1339. Linkage fees may be flat or percentage-based and are used by local governments to fund affordable housing development. Language was added to HB 1339 to clarify that a county or municipality which imposes a linkage fee must provide incentives to fully offset all fee costs to the developer of a residential or mixed-used residential development. Incentives may include allowing density or intensity bonuses, reducing or waiving fees, or others. This requirement was modeled after FAA's priority legislation from the 2019 session, HB 7103. This bill was signed into law last year and requires local governments to provide incentives to fully offset the developer's costs for affordable housing construction under an inclusionary zoning policy.
- **Fire radio system requirements (SB 1404).** Under current statute, local governments have the authority to determine the minimum strength of fire department radios in existing and new buildings within their jurisdictions. Apartment community developers and operators are required to install equipment that will boost the signal if needed for firefighters to communicate effectively in the event of an emergency. Because the authority rests with local governments, the processes and requirements vary across the state, causing challenges for some developers and operators. Under current law, existing apartment buildings are not required to comply with local signal strength requirements until January 1, 2025. However, apartment buildings are required to apply for the appropriate permit for the required communications installation by December 31, 2022.

- Sen. Lauren Book (D-32) introduced an amendment to SB 1404 to remove the language in state law that requires apartment communities to obtain a permit to install this fire radio signal equipment by December 31, 2022. Instead, the amendment called for apartment communities to have completed a minimum radio strength assessment by that date. Unfortunately, SB 1404 was indefinitely postponed and therefore did not advance to the floor during the 2020 session.

FAA Successfully Opposes Harmful Legislation

Over the course of the 2020 session, several pieces of legislation were introduced that could've wreaked havoc on the apartment industry and its bottom line. Here is just a small list of the bills that FAA successfully opposed this year.

- HB 6013 (Rep. Anna Eskamani, D-47) would have removed Florida's rent control preemption and allowed local governments to pass rent control measures. This bill died without a committee hearing and will have to be reintroduced next session to receive further consideration.
- SB 1852 (Sen. Jose Rodriguez, D-37) included numerous requirements such as a mandate to notify tenants before the sale of a rental property, protections for victims of domestic violence, requirement of just cause for evictions, and more. This bill died without a committee hearing and will have to be reintroduced next session to receive further consideration.
- HB 321 (Rep. Michael Grieco, D-113)/SB 480 (Sen. Jason Pizzo, D-38) would have prevented evictions during a state of emergency. HB 321 cleared one committee as amended. The revised language limited evictions during hurricane watches/warnings and added a mandatory five-day hold on a writ of possession. HB 321 died in committee and will have to be reintroduced next session to receive further consideration.
- SB 1528 (Sen. Victor Torres, D-15)/HB 6069 (Rep. Anna Eskamani, D-47) would have removed the requirement for a resident to pay rent into a registry of the court under certain circumstances. This bill died without a committee hearing and will have to be reintroduced next session to receive further consideration.

Other Notable Legislative Changes

Although it was a very successful year overall for FAA, one bill passed that was strongly opposed by the apartment industry. SB 374 (Sen. Darryl Rouson D-19) removes the requirement to exhaust administrative

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processes for housing discrimination complaints. This legislation has been successfully opposed several times over the years but this year had more momentum in both the House and Senate.

This momentum is likely because the Florida Commission on Human Relations was strongly advocating in favor of this legislation and claimed HUD funding could be cut if this bill was not passed during the 2020 session. The commission argued that Florida's existing law – requiring an individual to exhaust the administrative process before proceeding to court with a housing discrimination claim – was in violation of federal law. As a result, the legislation was passed by both the House and Senate. If this bill is signed by the governor, it will become effective immediately.

Other legislation, passed under direction from the governor, will require employers to use the federal E-Verify system. E-Verify is a federal database that was designed to aid employers in identifying undocumented immigrants who are ineligible to work in the U.S. SB 664 (Sen. Tom Lee, R-20) was passed by both the House and Senate.

Once signed into law by the governor, the legislation will become effective on July 1, and will require all government employers to use the federal E-Verify system. Private employers who decide not to use E-Verify will be required to keep a three-year record of the documents used by workers to complete an I-9 form to verify employment eligibility.

All things considered, FAA and the Florida apartment industry had a very successful 2020 legislative session. A special thanks to all the FAA members who took time to travel to Tallahassee for FAA's annual Legislative Conference. Your advocacy efforts made a critical impact and set the association up for a truly banner year.

As we begin to set our eyes on the 2021 session, FAA encourages members who are interested in attending next year's Legislative Conference or would like to help FAA formulate the association's legislative platform for the 2021 legislative session, to contact Amanda Gill at Amanda@faahq.org for more information. **MF**

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Apartment Communities Targeted in Lawsuits

NUMEROUS APARTMENT COMMUNITIES IN

Florida have been targets of lawsuits and demand letters claiming discrimination based on criminal history or inaccessible websites. Landlord/tenant attorneys estimate that nearly 200 demand letters have been served on apartment communities from 2019 through mid-May of 2020, many from fair-housing activists seeking financial settlements. The Florida Apartment Association and the National Apartment Association have issued advisories to make members aware of these lawsuits and to encourage them to take steps to avoid becoming party to a lawsuit. Please note: This should be considered information only and does not constitute legal advice. FAA recommends that members consult an attorney with specific legal questions.

Criminal History

Numerous lawsuits have been filed in Florida alleging that an individual who is a convicted felon called an apartment community to inquire about renting. The caller disclosed his felony conviction background and, he claims, the apartment community staff stated over the phone that his criminal background would result in an automatic denial of the application.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has issued guidance (available on the hud.gov website) regarding how criminal screening policies could be in violation of the Fair Housing Act, under what is known as disparate impact.

A disparate impact results from policies that have a discriminatory effect, even if the discrimination is unintended. According to HUD, certain policies, such as blanket policies against any individual with a criminal background, may negatively impact certain races and, therefore, have a disparate impact.

FAA recommends that members:

- Review current policies related to criminal screening to determine whether any changes should be made to avoid disparate impact liability.
- Be sure that all staff members who answer the phone are properly trained.
- Contact an attorney or in-house legal counsel for guidance and advice.

For more information:

www.naahq.org/advocacy/policy-issues/criminal-screening-residents
www.hud.gov/sites/documents/HUD_OGCGUIDAPPFHASTANDCR.PDF



Website Accessibility

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), consumer-facing websites must provide accommodations so people with vision or hearing disabilities can access the information on the sites. In recent years, the apartment management industry – as well as many other industries – has been targeted by what are known as “drive-by” or “surf-by” lawsuits seeking court-ordered remediation of the websites, attorneys’ fees, and monetary compensation. These lawsuits may also claim that the lack of accessible housing websites exists as a barrier to equal housing opportunities, thus violating the Fair Housing Act.

To protect against potential liability, FAA recommends that members:

- Review their websites to ensure compliance with ADA requirements.
- Contact their website provider for assistance identifying ADA compliance issues.
- Have a digital accessibility consultant perform a website audit to ensure the content and coding complies with ADA requirements.
- Update websites as recommended by the audit to ensure compliance.

For more information:

www.naahq.org/operation-solutions/legal-compliance-resources





VIRTUAL TOURS:

THE BEST WAY TO DO THIS

BY PAUL BERGERON

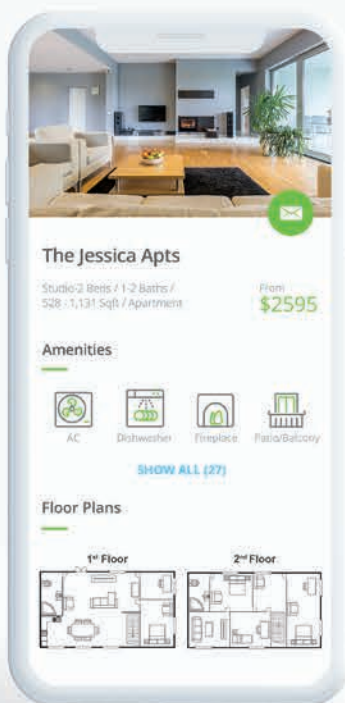
APARTMENT OPERATORS SPEND THOUSANDS of dollars and thousands of hours training their on-site leasing professionals. Faced with the new (temporary) normal of reliance on virtual leasing tours, there's no reason to rely on guesswork and your agent's smartphone to get this right.

Virtual tours are not the same as self-guided tours and certainly aren't the same as walking tours, says multifamily consultant Lisa Trosien.

And while recent statistical data from RealPage, CoStar, and Zillow show that traffic is picking up again, this doesn't mean that virtual tours are winding down.



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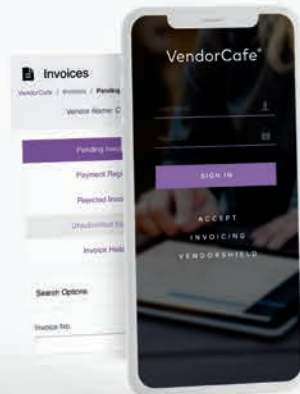
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ILS posting	✓	✓
Online applications	✓	✓
Online payments	✓	✓
Online maintenance	✓	✓
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Owner payments & reports	✓	✓
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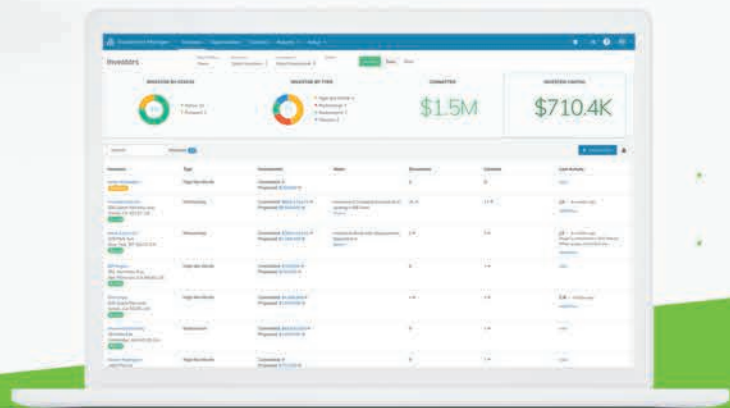


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These types of tours will remain a desired alternative in the future for out-of-town prospects, or for those who might still be hesitant to relax social distancing.

Practice, Practice, Practice

There are many commonsense points that apartment communities might be overlooking if they haven't adequately thought this through.

"It's not just walking around with your phone taking video," Trosien says. "You need to plan. Storyboard it. Practice it."

Virtual tours can be recorded or be conducted as live walk-throughs with the leasing professional communicating to the prospect every step of the way. That's the ideal situation, Trosien says. The tour can include walking the prospect through your website or a pre-recorded video, if it's feasible.

"With a live virtual tour, go out of your way to show them that during these challenging times you are doing it for them," she says. "They will appreciate it and remember you for it."

For in-person virtual tours, always ask the prospect: How much time do you have? And be sure to honor that. (Recorded tours should not go beyond two minutes. Really, about 1 minute, 45 seconds is the sweet spot, she says.)

Ask the prospect ahead of time what type of device they will be using to view the tour so you can plan accordingly.

"Remember, the tour is about them – not you," Trosien says. "They need to feel comfortable about what device they want to use. For a lot of people, taking part in a virtual tour is a real shift for them. Think about how awkward it might have been for you the first time you joined a Zoom call. You don't know what buttons to click and when. You don't how to turn on and off the video or audio."

Accessibility and accommodation are other components to address when delivering a well-executed virtual tour. Customizing a live virtual tour means persons with disabilities can be shown accommodations such as ramps, parking spaces, and interior fixtures.

For persons with hearing disabilities, audio can be replaced by captioning.

Live tours are more authentic because they are more interactive and conversational, she says. It starts with a warm welcome where the prospect can see the leasing professional's face. "Let them see who you are," she says. "Make that personal connection at the start."

Trosien says introverts and even extroverts really need to ramp up the personality while giving the tours. Yes, extroverts, too.

“You must be ‘on’ the entire time,” she says. “Ask questions throughout the tour after your points are being made: ‘What do you think of this?’ ‘Are you okay with that?’ ‘What do you think so far?’ ‘Do you have any questions?’ Keep it moving.

“Having this interaction is so important because you cannot see them; you are not getting your usual body-language cues and facial expressions to help you gauge their interest or displeasure.

“However, don’t turn your virtual tours into a creativity contest for your staff. This is not the place for this. Be creative about how to market it, such as on social media. But if you try to be clever during the tour, it can become a distraction for the prospect.”

Before the tour, Trosien says to list things that the prospect has shared that they are interested in seeing and be sure to include them.

“If they want a ‘western view,’ then give them one,” she says. “And right now, balconies are hugely popular, especially for prospects who didn’t have one before. During shelter-at-home, this might be their only (or primary) window to the world.

“And even if they didn’t emphasize the kitchen, you should. Spend extra time in the kitchen. During this pandemic, people are doing more cooking and baking from home. Highlight that.”

Hundreds of Dollars, Thousands of Dollars

Remember, Trosien says, “whether they will be leasing for a few hundred dollars a month in rent – or a few thousand – signing a lease is a major investment. You need to treat it like that no matter what class property you work at.”

Even though your amenities are closed, show them. Your residents will be using them at some point. If it’s difficult to do, make sure you have a recorded video that highlights the amenities to show them or to send to them.

For recorded tours, make sure to do them shoeless. There is nothing worse than the distracting echo of footsteps. And please: Put the toilet seat down, she says.

Finally, it’s tough, Trosien says, but at the end of the tour, you must ask the prospective resident: “Was there anything you didn’t like?”

This is mandatory because, “again, you have no idea what they are thinking because you weren’t able to see their reactions to things,” she says. “And if they say something was not right, be ready to respond to it.”

A Word About Privacy

Privacy for leasing professionals is an important aspect of this process. On-site staff do not want



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their personal cell phone numbers made available to the public. One benefit to Zoom is that it doesn’t capture or display cell phone numbers or other contact information.

Technical Difficulties

Most technology needed to do a strong virtual tour is surprisingly affordable.



Communities should absolutely buy tablets or smart phones for their properties specifically for this use, Trosien says. “Matterport [cameras] are great, great products, but you don’t absolutely need one to do these tours well.”

Virtual leasing must be accessible across all types of devices, browsers, operating systems, and technologies so as to not alienate anyone from joining those experiences because of the device that they do or do not have.

Leading virtual tour companies include Tour24, SmartRent, Rently, Power Pro, Virtual APT, LCP360, Show My Property and Engrain.

More advice from Trosien:

- Some older devices don’t have webcams. But you do need one. They are about \$25.
- Get a gimbal and attach it to your camera. It will improve the production of your video, such as allowing you to zoom in (not Zoom, lol). A gimbal is a pivoted point that allows videographers to rotate an object along a single axis and helps it to capture incredible images from various angles. They are priced from approximately \$40

to \$160 and are mostly used while making videos, but also can help to capture amazing still photos.

- Make sure the battery on your phone, tablet, or laptop is charged.
- Don’t fail the Wi-Fi strength test. Make sure the connection will be there at all points on the tour. You can determine this during practice runs.
- Add a My-Fi device to help improve your signal, especially in high-rise buildings where the connection could be susceptible to thick walls or while you are in an elevator or a stairwell. You don’t want the connection to fail. What does that tell the resident about your Wi-Fi abilities on-site?
- Don’t go out on a windy day, if you can possibly avoid it. Ideally, these tours should take place on sunny days (for recorded tours, there’s no excuse), but that’s not always possible. Buy extra floor lamps to use to help light the apartment home if you must conduct the tour on a cloudy day.

Paul Bergeron is a freelance reporter who covers the apartment industry. Reach him at pbergeron333@gmail.com or 703-434-0280. MF

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ContraVest communities hosted virtual scavenger hunts for residents staying safe at home during the pandemic. Residents collected household items and shared photos of them.

Keep Residents Connected Despite Social Distancing

BY CAMILA CAL

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY has always been important in the multifamily industry, and it took on a new significance during the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this year.

Health and government officials advised everyone to maintain “social distancing” of at least 6 feet and to limit contact with others, in order to decrease the spread of the highly contagious virus. In response, apartment communities closed offices and amenities, canceled events, and implemented other safeguards to protect the well-being of staff and residents.

At the same time, multifamily professionals know that a strong sense of community is key to resident satisfaction



and retention. In fact, in an annual SatisFacts survey about what drives perception of value for apartment residents, a sense of community has been at the top of the list every year since 2013, said Lia Nichole Smith, vice president of education and performance for ApartmentRatings and SatisFacts, a resident satisfaction and reputation management company.

But how are apartment communities supposed to build a sense of community when everyone is distanced?

“Sense of community is really about the residents and their connection to the management team,” Smith told attendees of a Florida Apartment Association webinar in March. “It’s all about that connection being built through daily interactions. We have to make sure we are focusing on the right areas to keep residents connected and feeling like they are the most important,” Smith said.

Properties can continue to maintain a strong sense of community during the pandemic, Smith said, because social distancing does not necessarily mean social isolation. Community building at a distance could include

online game nights, balcony dance parties, livestream workouts, and resident appreciation parades.

Some property management companies came up with their own creative ways to build community remotely.

“We have set up private Facebook pages for residents to join and view our many virtual events and posts,” said Christin Tenpenny, vice president of management operations for ContraVest, an apartment development and management company. “We post weekly maintenance video tips where our maintenance guys are producing how-to videos for non-emergency maintenance, funny baby pictures of the management staff, and the residents’ favorite COVID-19 pastime or food.”

Residents post pictures of their pets in a virtual pet dress-up competition for the best outfit. For a coloring contest, the community provides a theme and supplies for residents’ children to create art to be posted on apartment front doors. Residents participated in a virtual scavenger hunt as well, collecting common items like shoes, toothbrushes, hangers, and toilet paper.



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In addition to planning virtual events and contests for the residents, Williams said the community asks residents to light up their balconies at 8 p.m. to emphasize that they are not alone, although times may feel dark.



“There was a virtual Easter egg hunt where we delivered the baskets to residents’ doors, a virtual trivia night where the winners received a free pizza, and a virtual workout session,” Williams said. “On Mother’s Day, we delivered Mother’s Day baskets to the first three residents who submitted a photo of themselves with a loved one.”

Lantower recognizes that community building means supporting one another and lending a helping hand to the larger community whenever possible. Residents with food to spare can donate to a food pantry to benefit those in need, and the community has delivered pizza to Brandon Regional Hospital as a sign of appreciation for the healthcare workers, Williams said.

Social media has been a resource for property managers to connect with residents as well. TikTok, the video-sharing social media platform, has been popular for making funny videos that entertain residents. Both the Lantower and ContraVest teams use TikTok for sharing videos on certain days like “Wacky Wednesday” and “TikTok Tuesday.” The videos range from catchy songs that introduce the staff while they’re working, to trends that show what people do when they are bored in their home.

Smith also shared ideas for using social media. Instagram, for example, has a “Stories” section with templates to create polls or ask fill-in-the-blanks or “would you rather” questions. It’s a simple and fun way to communicate with residents and can make deciding what movie to stream or virtual game to play even easier.

“You can still connect with residents in light of social distancing. Even though they can’t see you or talk to you in person, there are still ways to keep that connection going because it’s so important,” Smith said. “If there is a decline in the sense of community, it will really impact how your residents cope throughout this process. It’s important to make sure they stay engaged and that the sense of community is strong.



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Think about how your residents felt two months ago compared to how they are feeling today. You want to have them feel like, in spite of all of these changes, they are still connected to the community.”

For more ideas, download a recording of *Building a Sense of Community Remotely* with Lia Nicole Smith at faahq.org/recorded-webinars. You will need to log in as an FAA member. **MF**



A Bright Future at The Edison

BY CAMILA CAL

NAMED AFTER THE GREAT inventor Thomas Edison, The Edison draws upon the history of the City of Fort Myers while bringing innovative ideas to the area. In 1886, Thomas Edison built an estate in Fort Myers where he would winter every year until his death in 1931. A few years later, his wife deeded the Seminole Lodge to the city in his memory. Edison's prominence and involvement helped bring national fame to Florida and the City of Fort Myers. Flash forward to 2020, and that same commitment he had to building a strong community is mirrored by The Edison.

Tucked into a 21-acre cypress preserve while also just a short drive from downtown Fort Myers, The





Edison offers residents the opportunity to infuse an active lifestyle with urban conveniences.

“When you pull into The Edison, you can tell it’s different. We’ve got four-story buildings, three-story buildings, and carriage homes. The elevations make it very unique. It’s an Old Florida design with a modern twist,” said Crystal Webster, The Edison’s community manager. “It doesn’t look like any other community I’ve seen in the past, and I’ve been in the business for 19 years.”

The Edison is complete with high-style design, unique floor plans, and luxurious features. Adjacent to shops, restaurants, and golf courses, the community is positioned so that beach trips are easy and nature trails

► The Edison Fast Facts:

- Opened in 2019
- Community size: 21 acres
- Number of units: 327
- Apartment size: ranges from 755-1,472 square feet
- Monthly rent: starting at \$1,380
- Managed by: Fogelman Multifamily Investments & Management

are within walking distance. The Edison is also known for its distinctive amenities such as an indoor pet spa with bathing and grooming tables, an outdoor yoga



lawn, a 24-hour fitness and training center, a fenced pet park with an agility course, and a 60,000-gallon saltwater pool with a sun shelf.

“The pool is the best in the area for this market. It has a very Caribbean vibe. There’s bamboo everywhere, boardwalks with hammocks, shelled areas, trellises with vibrant flowers, and a huge cabana house that has a fireplace, fire pits, and game tables. There’s a big game lawn where our residents gather and play bocce ball and cornhole,” Webster said.

Among these amenities are two that Webster said are unique to the area: a 24-hour neighborhood market and a business center. The neighborhood market is



located within the clubhouse and is stocked with items for residents' convenience.

"It's a huge selling point because there are so many options. You can go down to our clubhouse at night and grab ice cream, a quick frozen meal, or even toiletries for your guests. We have sodas, energy drinks, snacks, refreshments, and dog treats," Webster said.



The Edison also offers a business center where residents and businesses can rent an office space for a day, week, month, or year.

"It's a space with several different offices in it. You rent your space, and we provide you with internet, cable, refreshments, and office supplies; it's all-inclusive," Webster said. This business center also includes a



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conference room and invites those who may just need to utilize the space for a day.

“Perhaps you have a conference for work and you would like to host it here. You can use the conference room and TVs for presentations. People really love taking advantage of this amenity. No one else in the Fort Myers area has this type of workspace,” said Webster.

Additionally, The Edison prides itself on hosting elaborate community events.

“Trivia is our biggest night here, with at least 60 people competing regularly. We also do a painting party night, wine Wednesday, or walking taco night.



Almost every other Saturday we have an incredible spread of brunch with charcuterie platters, waffle makers, and bacon – it's like an amped-up continental breakfast," said Webster.

She explained that even during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on socializing, The Edison has been hard at work ensuring the best experience for residents and prospects. "Believe it or not, even with COVID-19, we've ramped up even more. We're doing seven to nine leases a week right now. The Edison team took this difficult situation under their wing and just did incredible things like self-guided tours with stickers on the ground that took people to places around the community."



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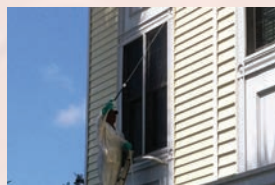


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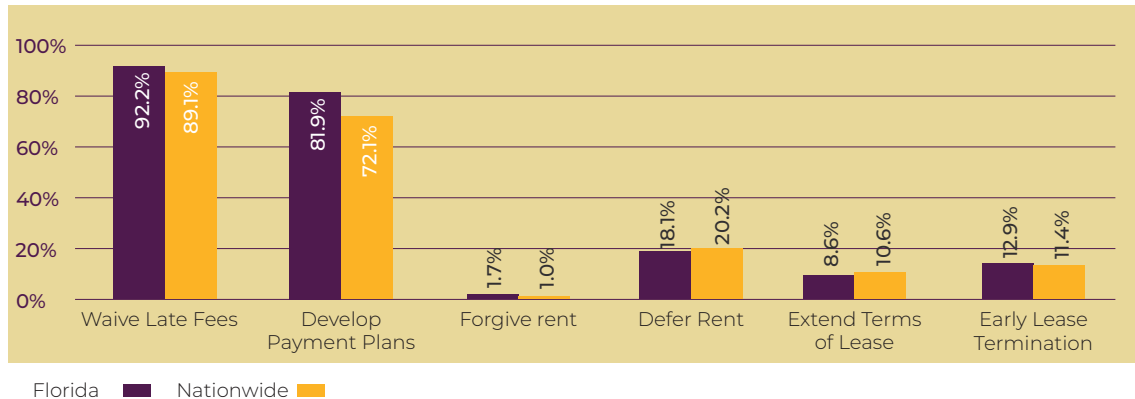


Residents were also surprised with gift boxes that contained candles to brighten their day, Webster said.

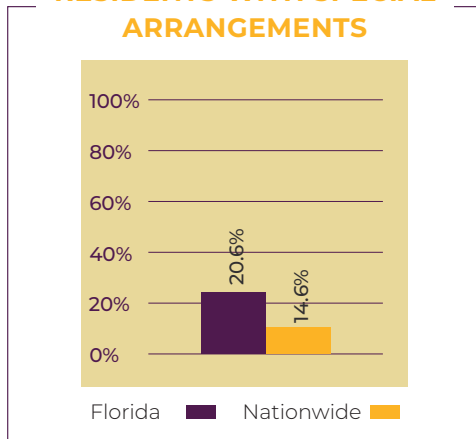
"The pureness of truly loving what you do is spread throughout this office. My team loves making people feel very welcome, so I think that sets us apart. The feedback I get from residents and every prospect when they come in and end up choosing to lease with us is that they feel at home here," Webster said. **MF**

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Multifamily Properties

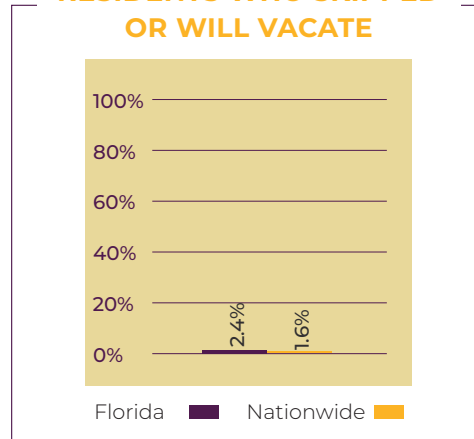
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS MADE TO ASSIST RESIDENTS



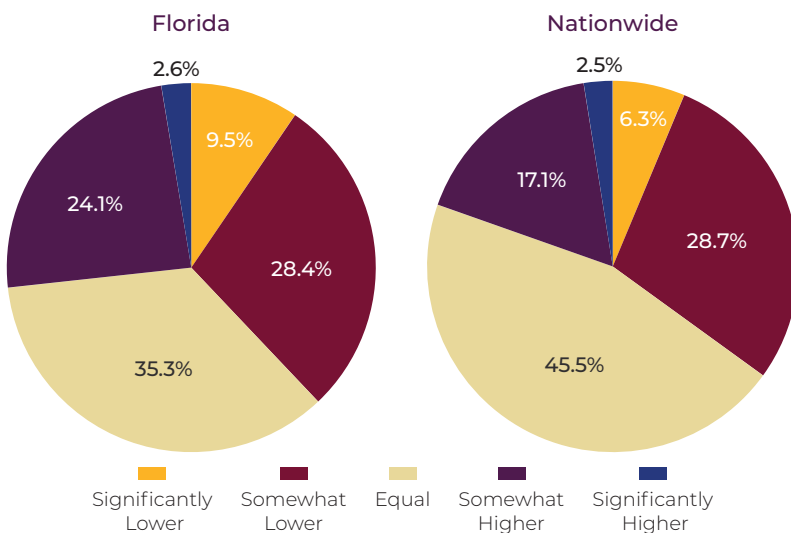
RESIDENTS WITH SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS



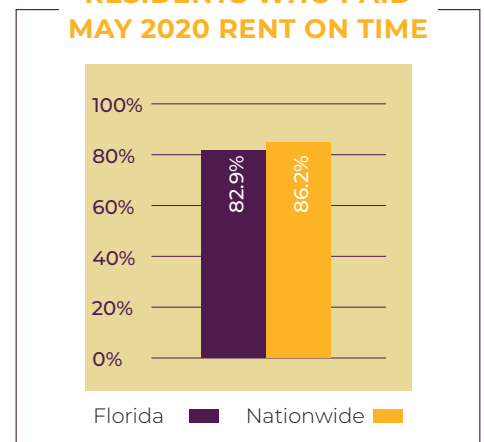
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ON-TIME RENT PAYMENT IN MAY 2020 COMPARED TO APRIL 2020



RESIDENTS WHO PAID MAY 2020 RENT ON TIME



Source: ALN Apartment Data Inc.

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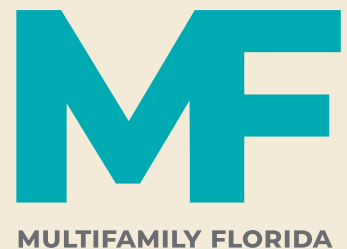
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