

Taking Care!

Maintaining A Loved One's Unoccupied Home!

By Lisa M. Petsche – lmepetsche@gmail.com

It may happen unexpectedly: your parent or other senior relative who lives alone must spend a significant period of time in a hospital or rehabilitation center. If they're a house dweller, looking after their home and its contents may be a complex task.

Read on for valuable tips on how to keep your relative's property safe and sound, indoors and out, during their absence.



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Indoor Security Measures

- Remove keys – to the house, car, gates and sheds – hanging by the door or stashed in a drawer.
- Ensure all points of entry – windows, doors (including the one connecting the garage to the house), mail chutes and pet entrances – are secured. Place a snug-fitting piece of metal or wood in the bottom of sliding window and glass door tracks. Disconnect the automatic garage door opener and manually lock garage doors.
- Arrange for mail to be redirected and pause newspaper delivery.
- Notify a trusted neighbor that your relative is away and ask them to watch for suspicious activity and call police if necessary. Ensure this person knows how to reach you should any problems arise. Also ask them to do one or more of the following to make the house appear occupied: remove flyers from the mailbox and porch; park a vehicle in the driveway, place a bag at the curb on garbage pickup day.
- Selectively keep some blinds open, and put indoor lights on timers.
- If there's a landline, unplug any phones.
- Unplug electrical items that are susceptible to power surges (televisions and computers, for example).
- Remove small valuables – such as cash, jewelry, identification, credit cards and important documents – and store them somewhere safe.
- Read your relative's homeowner's insurance policy or check with their agent to determine if their policy provides coverage while the home is unoccupied for an extended time, and if so, under what conditions. Ensure any conditions are met.
- Perform regular checks for pests, water infiltration and other problems. Checks are especially important after storms.

Outdoor Considerations

- Remove spare keys hidden under mats or elsewhere.
- Lock tools and ladders in the garage or a shed so they're not accessible to thieves.
- Install timers or put photosensitive bulbs in outdoor lights.
- Perform regular perimeter checks for signs of forced entry. If you find any, remain outside and call the police from your cell phone or a neighbor's home.
- If neither you nor other relatives are able to perform outdoor maintenance tasks, enlist the help of a reliable neighbor (consider hiring a teenager from the block) or contract with a yard maintenance service. Another option is to hire a property manager to regularly inspect the place inside and out and arrange grounds keeping.

Vehicle Security

- Ensure windows and doors are closed tight and locked.
- Remove registration and insurance information, as well as hidden keys.
- Record the license number as well as the color, year, make and model of the vehicle, and any visible damage.
- Lock the vehicle in the garage. If that's not an option, get a security device such as an electronic alarm, kill switch or steering wheel lock.
- Further Considerations
- Remove refrigerator contents that can spoil, and any other perishable foods in the kitchen.
- Store opened dry goods such as sugar and flour in sealed containers, or place them in the fridge. Ensure kitchen and dining areas are free of food residue.
- Take home plants to ensure they receive the necessary care.
- Turn off the water supply to the house if regular lawn and garden watering is not part of the maintenance plan.
- Close chimney flues, which can be a point of entry for birds and small animals.

Lisa M. Petsche is a social worker and freelance writer specializing in seniors' health and wellness.



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