



# When Tragedy Happens

## A High-Rise Manager's Worst Fear

by Joseph Sanders, CMCA

**O**n occasion, there comes a time when managers responsible for operating a mid-rise or high-rise building have to deal with tragedy. This type of tragedy is truly every high-rise manager's worst nightmare. That bad dream is someone falling from the building. This may not happen to a high-rise manager in his or her entire career; yet it may happen more than once. The chances or odds, if you will, of it occurring are commensurate with the nature of what a high-rise building is.

High-rise buildings have all types of emergency plans, ranging from fires to hurricanes. Emergency preparedness is paramount in this industry. This not only applies to residential high-rises, but commercial buildings as well.

One never knows when tragedy will strike. Tragedy does not exclude those in their teens clowning around; children who are curiously careless; employees, vendors, or residents who suffer accidents; and those who attempt to take their own lives. The key is to be ready, as ready as one can be, to deal with such an incident.

Those who manage mid-rises and high-rises should have a plan in place to deal with and address such matters. While the plan may be simple in nature or limited in its scope, since these scenes are usually managed by the authorities who are quick to respond to the scene, it is a plan nonetheless.

Prevention is always the first item of consideration. Employees, particularly maintenance and housekeeping, should always follow safety rules

when performing duties and tasks. This is especially true when performing tasks, such as changing a light bulb or cleaning a window along a common area walkway, in a mid-rise or high-rise structure. If said employees find themselves above the balcony or walkway railing in the course of their tasks, they should wear a safety harness. An extra measure of safety is having another employee with them to observe and assist.

Mandatory balcony railing inspections are also an important source of prevention. If a hotel or condominium building has three or more stories, the Florida Administrative Code for Public Lodging Establishments (Section 509.2112) demands that one must submit a Certificate of Balcony Inspection every three years to Florida officials. Having balcony railings inspected according to code is vital to prevention. Having the maintenance department inspect railings on a frequent basis can be considered an extra preventative measure.

Discussing children in such instances is always deeply disturbing and one shudders at the thought of such. However, there are preventative measures that can be taken in this instance as well. Balcony railings that are built to code in this day and age have a specific width between rails of four inches. This prohibits little ones from slipping between the railings. The main concern is "up and over." First and foremost, make sure that all staff and security personnel are always attentive and on the lookout for unsupervised young children on balconies. Also discourage the use of bistro type furniture on balconies. This type of balcony or patio furniture is typically taller than standard or regular outdoor tables and chairs. Having bistro furniture on balconies can put a youngster at the top of the railings with little to no effort on the child's part. Encourage owners and guests not to leave any type of ladder or stepping stool accessible to children on a balcony.

**There is not a rule book to guide you through handling such an incident. However, if a response plan is in place that your staff and security personnel are familiar with, one will be better prepared. Again, use good judgment.**



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People sometimes do things that can be considered nothing more than a fatal error. Take, for instance, the case of a realtor from the Florida Panhandle who was visiting a sixth-floor unit that she had listed. She and a colleague went out to the balcony and noticed the ceiling fan was out of balance. One of the realtors went into the condominium while the other stayed on the balcony. While there, it is believed that she attempted to adjust the fan. She moved a chair on which to stand directly below the fan. Obviously, this action took her height above that of the railing. Investigators said the woman accidentally fell from the balcony while trying to fix the fan.

Then, there are those who choose to take a chance at life. In several areas of the United States, young people gather for Spring Break; this is especially true in Florida. Often, tragic incidents occur when alcohol is involved. One popular escapade is balcony hopping. The goal is to step on the outside of the balcony railing and swing to the adjoining balcony or drop down and swing into the balcony below. This is conduct that no hotel or condominium high-rise should ever tolerate. As stated above, all staff and security personnel should be attentive and aware of what is going on above. If this ritual is observed, identify the hotel room or condominium unit and call the police immediately. Do not hesitate to evict and send said person straight to jail.

While tragedy comes in many forms, there is one that speaks to this subject in a way that leaves most people baffled—those who choose to take their own lives. It seems that those bent on such action will do it. The only prevention in this instance may be performed by those who are there at that moment in time. If the police, fire department, clergy, or even a family member is able to intervene before such tragic action is

taken, then the day is won and a new life begins, hopefully.

After considering ideas of prevention, then comes the plan of action—what to do and how to respond. It is highly likely that the authorities will be on the scene within minutes. During that time, the property manager and staff should put their response plan into action.

Here are some ideas that can assist the property manager in dealing with this type of situation. One may want to take some of these ideas and, along with your input and that of your board of directors, work to create a comprehensive response plan that can be adopted as policy or as an established procedure for the association or property. When putting together a response plan, have the board decide who will be the person to address the press, as they will be on your



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property. It is important what is said and who says it.

First, it will be essential to record as much pertinent information about the victim and incident as possible. An Incident Report may suffice. These reports can be found online and at some retail office supply stores. Consider assembling a response kit. Place anything in the response kit that may prove helpful in managing such an incident. Consider keeping response kits in multiple locations on the property. Some items to consider are:

- An incident report
- A tablet of paper
- Several pens
- A disposable camera
- Three or four flat white sheets
- Disposable gloves
- A roll of "Caution" or "Crime Scene" yellow ribbon tape

Consider the following as part of your response, but not necessarily in the order shown. Remember, use your best judgment and make a plan that you believe will work best for you, your team, and property.

- In addition, make sure that you and your staff members or team keep a level head.
- Immediately call 911.
  - Keep the scene clear and accessible to emergency response teams and authorities.
  - Use the yellow ribbon tape to mark off the scene until the authorities arrive.
  - Cooperate with the authorities and be as helpful as possible; this applies both to management, staff, and security personnel.
  - Notify your board president.

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- If working for a management company, notify your immediate superior.
- Inform your insurance company (it will want as much information as possible).
- Notify your association's attorney (he/she too will want as much information as possible).
- If feasible, use the disposable camera in the response kit or a digital camera to photograph the scene. Remember, this occurred on your property; take as many photographs as the situation warrants. You will be asked to provide visual documentation to the authorities, your insurance provider, and attorney.
- As part of your plan, know to whom to direct the press.
- Ascertain what condominium unit or hotel room from which the victim came.
- Don't be shy; visit the unit or room, introduce yourself, and obtain as much information as possible. This may be difficult; however, the police will likely assist as they too will be there obtaining information.
- If you have surveillance cameras, check them to see if they recorded the incident, in whole or in part. Consider off-property cameras at neighboring properties that may have captured something of importance.
- If deemed necessary, consider counseling for yourself and any staff or personnel who may have witnessed the incident or aftermath.
- The area will have to be cleaned. Know what companies in your area perform bio-hazard clean-up and be prepared to engage their services.

As previously stated, there is not a rule book to guide you through handling such an incident. However, if a response plan is in place that your staff and security personnel are familiar with, one will be better prepared. Again, use good judgment. We can all only hope and pray as property managers assigned to mid-rise or high-rise buildings that we will never have to engage our plan and face such a tragedy.

***Note:** At the close of writing this article, news arrived of a guest who accidentally fell from a third floor balcony of a 23-story high-rise on Panama City Beach, FL. The victim survived with severe injuries.*

*Joseph Sanders is a senior association manager in Northwest Florida. He has written several articles of industry interest for the Florida Community Association Journal. ■*



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