



# CIRSA HAZARD ALERT

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## Hazard Alert – Protecting Vacant Buildings & Other Valuable Assets



COVID-19 has radically changed the way we do business, at least temporarily. Members have fast-tracked telecommuting capabilities, shifted patron access to virtual methodologies, and otherwise reinvented how they serve constituents. These forced changes will ultimately provide us greater knowledge of available technologies and likely result in more efficient and productive long-term strategies.

However, during this state of change, while we are preoccupied with everything that is in front of us, we want to make sure we don't lose focus on assets that need attention even if they are not being seen, visited or used as much as before the pandemic. These assets can include semi- or fully vacant buildings, water and wastewater infrastructures, right-of-way assets (sidewalks, traffic control signage, and signals, etc.), and fleet vehicles and equipment.

Theft and vandalism concerns are at the forefront. Other considerations are weather-related intrusions, shelter-based trespassing, broken water or wastewater lines, HVAC malfunctions, and the list can go on.

To that end, here is some basic guidance for the protection of entity-owned assets.

1. **Inspect** - Conduct regular inspections of all important buildings, vehicle parking areas, and other infrastructure. Change the inspection routine frequently by having different people conduct the inspections, and complete the inspections at different time intervals. Weekly inspections should be conducted, at a minimum, and more frequent inspections for buildings that are not winterized are recommended.

Sidewalks, traffic signals, and street signs should also be inspected regularly. The public is conditioned to seeing utility and public works personnel and vehicles staged on the side of the road or in rights-of-ways while performing work, so have these valuable team members continue to do so, even if their presence is temporary. Seeing municipal vehicles, with yellow lights flashing, provides a semblance of normalcy and can also serve to deter vandalism.

*(page 1 of 3)*

# CIRSA HAZARD ALERT

## *Protecting Vacant Buildings (cont.)*

2. **Provide the appearance of occupation** – During inspections, leave some lights on that will be visible at night. Switch out which lights are on each night. Where vehicles and equipment are staged, consider moving them to different locations in the staging area. Don't stop routine "maintenance" operations, such as trash removal, snow plowing, or mowing. These "grooming" efforts provide a visual deterrent via the appearance of presence and occupancy.
3. **Realize downtime savings** – This time of lower occupancy does provide a small silver lining; we can save money temporarily. Work with your HVAC and/or electrical staff to determine if lighting and HVAC can be automated to help lower energy bills. You may desire to prop open non-fire rated doors. This will help with heating related airflow as building temperatures are lowered.
4. **Prioritize your energy usage** – Unplug all non-essential equipment, especially any portable heaters, kitchen appliances, etc. Turn off the gas to any natural or propane-powered non-essential appliances and equipment.
5. **Manage fire doors** – Fire rated doors should not be "propped" open unless connected to an automatic (electro magnetic) system that allows them to close once alarms are triggered. Yet we periodically find buildings where fire doors have been "propped" open for extended periods. Therefore, this is a great time to complete full-facility fire inspections, test alarm systems, ensure alarm panel integrity, etc. Reach out to your local fire jurisdiction for assistance.
6. **Ask your neighbors for help** – A lot of municipal infrastructure is mixed into a general business neighborhood. Speak to your business neighbors and ask that they call a central point of contact if they see anything suspicious (and return the favor if you notice anything that would be of concern to them). Keeping your facilities safe from threats also helps to protect the local business community as well.
7. **Set those alarms** – Many buildings have alarm-based security systems that rarely get used. Start using them again if their usage has gone dormant over time. If you don't have alarms, contact your local vendors and look into temporary alarm packages.
8. **Task Emergency Responders** – Most likely, law enforcement is already patrolling vacant areas, buildings, and parking lots. But if not, ask them to spend more time in vulnerable areas or remote sites. Water master stations are widely ignored but can pose a great risk if vandalized or damaged. The same can be stated for wastewater infrastructure, such as lift stations. Your local EMS/Fire jurisdiction may also be capable of assisting. Ask if they could periodically stage at designated buildings, areas, or parking lots for a short amount of time. Their additional presence may also deter vandalism, provide valuable control, and help prevent other problematic situations.
9. **Increase security monitor presence** – If you have appropriately trained staff whose regular work has been curtailed, consider having them work some time as temporary security monitors. They wouldn't and couldn't function as licensed security guards, but could they provide valuable walk-throughs of buildings and other sites.
10. **Provide temporary barriers** – Should you have facilities that cannot be occupied daily but that have valuable equipment, appliances, and/or materials present, consider placing gates or temporary concrete barriers at vehicle access points. These barriers won't prevent foot traffic but will prevent vehicles from entering, making it more difficult to remove and load valuables into a vehicle.

*(page 2 of 3)*

# CIRSA HAZARD ALERT

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## *Protecting Vacant Buildings (cont.)*

11. **Employ simple security measures** – Some of the options above come with a price tag your entity may not be able to afford at this time. However, some very simple options exist that provide protection. For example, wooden dowel rods or other lumber can be cut to fit into window and door openings making them more difficult to pry open. In many cases, slowing down an aggressor is enough to stop their efforts to access your facilities.

We hope these basic tips are of some help, or spark ideas for other protection methods for your entity. Please know that CIRSA is here to assist you in any way possible, so please feel free to contact your CIRSA Loss Control Representative if you have questions.