



PROFILES OF SURVIVAL

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MARGARET MARTINEZ

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SINCE MARCH 2020, THE COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted nearly all businesses. For property managers, the coronavirus crisis brought unique challenges. Social distancing, shelter-at-home mandates, travel restrictions, rent collection, and property maintenance are just some of the challenges that impacted landlords.

In the property management field for 30 years, Margaret Martinez is the Vice President of Operations for CIG (Clear Integrity Group) in San Antonio. CIG provides property management and brokerage services for multi-family and commercial properties. Margaret shared how the “new norm” looks in a post-COVID-19 era.

Roxana: What kind of challenges did the pandemic bring to property managers?

Margaret: When COVID first hit we had no idea it would last this long. Conditions in which we operate at our apartment communities changed overnight. We had to think outside the box to overcome new difficulties and avoid spreading the virus. It was necessary to go digital and connect with residents without physical contact. We’ve adapted to regulatory changes like eviction moratoria and implemented new safety protocols at our properties. Property management is not something we can operate and oversee remotely. We had to not only keep our residents and staff safe, but we had to ensure properties still look good and maintenance emergencies are taken care. You could not do it all remotely.

Roxana: What kind of changes did your staff have to adapt to?

Margaret: First, everyone has to remember that property management staff working in apartment communities are essential workers. Residents needed us to take care of their homes. More residents were at home most of the time than before. Some of our office and maintenance staff did not want to come to work because they were afraid of being exposed to the virus. We had to reassure them that the safety and health of our residents and our teams simultaneously are

most important to us. We implemented strict masks requirements and social distancing. In an effort to manage traffic in the office, residents were only permitted to come in with an appointment. Initially, our maintenance staff only went in residents’ apartments for maintenance emergencies. All of these measures assured our staff we also cared about them and their safety.



↑ Margaret Martinez

refused to follow the new rules. We spent a lot of time explaining how important it is for everyone that we follow the CDC guidelines. This also included teaching more residents how to submit maintenance requests online, pay their rent online and communicate more via email, text, and phone versus coming into the office. I do believe residents have gotten used to it more and are liking that now, but it took time. **The most important aspect of all the changes has been communicating with residents**, letting them know we are here for them and providing resources for them to be able to address and solve their own situation and take care of their health during these times.

Roxana: How have collections been during COVID and what particular challenges did you face here?

Margaret: This all depended on the type of demographics at our properties. At the higher rent properties, we did not have much of a challenge collecting. This was mainly because

they were able to work from home and they continued to get a paycheck. At the lower rent properties where most of the residents worked outside the home, collections have been challenging. Even for those that qualified for unemployment, it took a while to receive their checks. There was rental assistance that the city and county provided, but many residents did not qualify to receive that help. With the eviction moratoria in place, we did not have necessary tools at our disposal to get people to pay their rent. Some took advantage of our inability to evict anyone and did not use their unemployment checks or income they had to pay rent. That has been frustrating. When Texas Rent Relief - the new program with rental assistance available - was launched, we hired a team member whose only tasks is to help residents apply for assistance. The process has been slow and those residents that owe many months of rent are still pending approval for assistance. In the meantime, regardless of collections, owners have had to pay for mortgage, property insurance, payroll, maintenance and the day-to-day operations.

Roxana: What about leasing?

Margaret: It was a bit slow for a while when many were not getting out of their homes, but leasing activity is starting to pick up. We have done a lot of virtual tours for our prospective residents. We had to replace some of our outreach marketing with online platforms. Overall, we are looking forward to being able to open our pools and have resident events.

COVID-19 has made the value of property managers more evident and in-demand than ever. The crisis management that has long been a primary aspect of property managers’ work has prepared them to adapt, shift, and innovate in the face of the unique challenges that have emerged in 2020. That has made property management companies feel confident in the future growth of their businesses. ■

If procrastinators had a club, would they ever have a meeting?