



A difficult subject: Managing unattended death

During the course of a routine day at work, the average person does not typically think about death or dying. Death is a very personal subject and there are many different belief systems that influence a person's thoughts on the subject. When confronted with death, different people will have different coping strategies and react in different ways. Many people have a strong reaction and become upset and overwhelmed. This reaction is completely normal and can be intense in the event of discovering an unattended death.

BY ROBERT HOLBROOK

An unattended death occurs when a person dies and is not found for days or longer. This sometimes happens when someone commits suicide or passes away of natural causes, and does not have anybody to check on them. Unfortunately, an unattended death situation can be discovered by individuals who work in the property management profession.

When an unattended death situation has been discovered, the first step is to call 911. This call will bring in the appropriate services. There will be an investigation, and the body will be removed from the site. At this point, it's important to work with the police and other members of their team to assist with their investigation. It's also important for the person who discovered the unattended death to find personal support if he or she feels it's needed. There is no shame in admitting that the discovery has had a negative impact on oneself.

An unfortunate part of an unattended death is having to deal with clean up and remediation issues. The human body decays

rather rapidly, especially in warmer weather. The site where the body lay may be wet with fluid, which can soak into the flooring. These bodily fluids can contain pathogens that can remain infectious outside of the body. In some cases, there could be blood spatter. The living space where death occurred may become extremely malodorous from the release of gasses and the explosive growth of bacteria, and the smell from the unit can also permeate and impact the common areas.

Cleaning up an unattended death scene is not a regular cleaning job. Cleaners must use the appropriate personal protection equipment to avoid contact with pathogens and prevent infection. Carpeting, flooring and subflooring may have to be stripped away and removed. This requires the cleaners to know how to use tools and follow safety procedures. The cleaning staff must maintain confidentiality and work in a discreet and respectful manner. They must be patient and complete a thorough job to eliminate all traces of the event.

Items stained with bodily fluids cannot be thrown into the municipal dump. The cleaning service must use specially marked and sealed containers. These containers must be disposed of at an appropriate facility. The cleaning company will receive a chain of custody document after showing that they adhered to the correct disposal methods.

Hopefully property managers will never come across an unattended death. It is, however, important to know how to handle the situation if they do. If property managers are prepared, they may still be upset but perhaps not overwhelmed. □

Robert Holbrook, MSW, RSW, is the owner of Toronto Hoarding Services. He has more than 15 years of experience providing mental health therapy services in the outpatient mental health departments of three major hospitals in Toronto. He specializes in helping condominium managers remediate hoarding situations. For more information, call 416-569-0846 or visit www.torontohoardingservices.ca.

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