

Do you have a contingency plan for water damage?

by Paul Daniele

The winter of '94 will long be remembered as one of the coldest in recent history. Pipes were bursting across the Northeast at an epidemic proportion. Flood damage companies were working around the clock for nearly six weeks trying to keep up with the onslaught of calls. Insurance adjusters were backlogged for months. With this backlog, where did it leave the condominium associations?

It seems like a very long time ago. But soon it's going to start all over again. The 20 degree temperatures will be here before long. Now is the time for condominium associations to be thinking about a contingency plan in the event of water damage. Who are you going to call?

There are many companies who advertise in the phone book "24 hour emergency water removal" or "flood restoration specialists." The question condo associations should ask themselves is, "What company is qualified and capable of meeting the needs of my association?"

To evaluate a prospective water damage restoration company you should have an understanding of the basic restoration procedures the company will employ as well as a little of the industry's history.

Industry history

Flood damage restoration has come a long way since the mid 70s, when the majority of the restoration companies were really just "wet carpet drying services." These companies did not concern themselves with the structure or its contents. Today carpet drying is a small aspect of the restoration process. Carpets typically can now be dried in one or two days, whereas the structure and its contents can typically take three to four days to dry depending on the structural materials affected.

In the mid '70s, the industry had two schools of thought. The backgrounds of the restorers originated in two distinct fields, thus the different views. Janitorial and construction companies were the two dominant industries in the field at that time. The restorer with a construction background was more apt to want to remodel or replace. The restorer with a janitorial background wanted to save as much as possible because he or she did not have the construction background. The industry now has evolved into one school of thought. The industry's credo now is, "Try to save as much as possible." Insurance companies now understand the significant savings an effective restoration job can produce. The cost of replacing structural elements as well as household goods can be extremely high. Replacement costs can run between 35 and 80 percent higher than restoration costs in most cases.

The second very important aspect of restoration versus replacement is time. In an average water damage loss, the time to dry a structure is three to four days, whereas reconstruction might take weeks. Restoration minimizes the disruption to the homeowner.

Basic water restoration steps

The responsibility of a restoration company is to restore all affected materials to a dry state. There are five steps involved which should be adhered to in most situations.

Step one — Make a flood-related safety inspection. Check for any hazardous conditions such as structural damage, electrical hazards, pathogenic bacteria, mold and mildew. If any hazards are found they should immediately be passed on to the unit owner and/or management company. Determine to

what extent the water has actually migrated into the structure using a hydrosensor (moisture detector).

Step two — Remove as much water as possible via pumps, portable extraction units and truck mounted extraction systems. Move or elevate any and all building contents which might be permanently damaged.

Step three — Recompress carpets with a carpet roller to push out remaining water in the padding. Re-extract the carpeting.

Step four — Disinfect the surface and subsurface of the carpeting to prevent the growth of mold and mildew.

Step five — Set up dehumidifiers and air movers.

The five steps in water removal are fairly simple. The true water damage restorer's talent is in the actual drying of the structure. The technician will survey the structure to see the kind of materials they will be drying. Their objective is to create an artificially dry environment. The drier the environment, the faster the structure can dry out. To achieve this state, commercial grade dehumidifiers and air movers are utilized. The air movers' function is to pull moisture out of structural material such as wood flooring, drywall, plaster and framing material and place this moisture into the atmosphere. It is then the dehumidifiers' job to pull that moisture-laden air over its coils; water condenses on the coils thus dehumidifying the air. The condensed water is then collected or pumped away. This system will rapidly dry out a structure.

Problems can occur if the restorer is unqualified. Too much or too little air movement and not enough dehumidification can lead to problems.

If a water-damaged structure has too much air movement and not enough dehumidification, there is the possibility of secondary damage. Secondary damage is the result of extremely high relative humidity which can cause: damage of books and electrical instruments; doors, drawers, and ceilings to warp; wallpaper to peel; and even metal to corrode. If the water damage technician, on the other hand, employs an inadequate amount of airmovers, it will prolong the drying process. The longer the water is present, the higher the probability that there will be damage to structural elements—sub floors buckling, sheetrock disintegrating, frame work warping, carpet backing rotting, etc.

Condominium associations and management companies should interview water damage restoration companies well before a problem occurs. Ask them about their procedures. What kind of equipment do they have? Ask if they have any photographs from past floods. Do they really have 24-hour service, 365 days a year? Will they show up New Year's Day if you call them? If a pipe breaks on the third floor and 10 units are affected, do they have enough equipment and manpower necessary to dry the structure? Check to see certification. All companies serious about water damage restoration will be Institution of Inspection Cleaning and Restoration Certified (IICRC).

The need for a qualified and capable water damage company is very important. If the restoration job is done ineffectively, what could have been a three day problem will turn into a three month headache.