



FirstService
RESIDENTIAL



Communication during crisis: **Learning from COVID-19**

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Effective communication is at the heart of every successful community association. Now more than ever, implementing effective virtual communication practices is essential for community associations. Communication helps create better relationships among board members, residents and your property management company, even when you can't be together in person. It also clarifies job roles and expectations. Communication contributes to the association's sense of community and ensures that residents know what to do during a crisis.

This guide looks at what it takes for your board to communicate effectively with residents. It also examines the role of technology and offers guidelines for developing a crisis communication plan.



What does great communication look like?

Having your community association function smoothly depends a great deal on keeping the lines of communication open. That means your board must do more than just send out legally mandated meeting notices. Here are 9 principles you can apply to improve the way you communicate with your community.

- 1. Plan each communication.** Planning out your message up front will ultimately save you time and prevent potential issues. Determine what your communication needs to accomplish and how far in advance to send it out. Stick to a single topic, and keep it as brief as possible based on residents' current understanding of the issue. John Santoro, executive vice president at FirstService Residential, also recommends keeping a positive tone. "Tone matters more than we think," he explains. "Communications should stay positive and rooted in the values of the community."
- 2. Prioritize your communications.** Ideally, you want to inform residents about everything that affects them. However, if you have limited time or resources, focus on high-priority items first, such as meeting notices, financial information and policy changes.
- 3. Be transparent.** Open communication establishes trust, encourages participation and helps facilitate compliance, but some boards are guarded about sharing information because they fear potential litigation. However, this approach can create suspicion. According to Santoro, there's a better way to protect the association. "Depending on what you send out, have your attorneys review it," he says. "Even if you need to communicate bad news, residents will accept it better if you are honest with them and explain the process that led the board to its decision."
- 4. Communicate regularly.** Residents appreciate a regular flow of information. Without it, they may fill voids with misinformation and rumors. If the task is too much for board members to do on their own, engage the help of a committee or your property manager. "You may want to establish a newsletter or social committee that you can rely on to get information out," says Jennifer McCaw, regional director at FirstService Residential Illinois, "but their scope should be limited."
- 5. Be factual.** Haste can result in distributing inaccurate information. "Never speculate," warns Randy Grimes, regional director at FirstService Residential. "Just lay out the facts." McCaw agrees. "Anything you put in writing is out there permanently, so make sure it's factual and unbiased." She also recommends avoiding absolutes like "always" or "never."
- 6. Use multiple channels.** "People have different preferences in how they receive communications, so if the goal is to get information into the hands of residents, you should use every available

method,” says Grimes. This includes email, your community website and newsletter, phone calls, flyers, bulletin board announcements and board meetings. McCaw adds one caveat: “It’s best to start out with a written communication so you have some sort of documentation.” Grimes notes that sometimes taking a more grassroots approach to communication works best, as was the case at one association he was involved with. Residents responded negatively when they were informed of a special assessment.

“When we tried to hold a town hall, we had people getting upset,” he says. “So instead, we set up meetings with small groups of owners to discuss the assessment, which was much more effective.”

7. Make communication a two-way street.

Residents need the opportunity to voice their concerns and share their opinions. Reserve time for open discussions at board meetings and send out surveys to find out what’s important to them. You may even want to set up get-togethers where residents can express their views to board members in a casual setting. However, make it clear that the board can only take action during board meetings and only on items that are on the agenda. “It’s common for residents to approach board members individually to get what they want,” says McCaw. “Anytime someone does that, you should direct them to the property manager.”

8. Communicate equally with renters. Any communication you send to homeowners should go out to renters as well. Establish a process for getting their contact information when they first move in, and give them access to your governing documents. Don’t assume that their landlords are informing them of your policies or emergency procedures. Above all, remember that today’s renter could become tomorrow’s homeowner.

9. Seek out a property management company that values communication.

Your management company should be able to relieve you of the task of developing and sending out resident communications – but only with your consent. “You never want to be surprised that a community manager communicated with your residents without your knowledge,” says Grimes. Look for a company that will develop a welcome packet for new residents that includes your association’s rules and regulations, contact information and other important details specific to your property. To make it easy for all residents to conduct community business and obtain information at their convenience, the company should also provide 24/7 customer care support and an online self-service platform. Tutorials for using the online platform should be readily available and be part of the welcome packet as well. In addition, the company should proactively communicate new laws and other changes that could impact your community, seek your feedback so it can improve its service and offer board training to help you become a better board member.

Open communication establishes trust, encourages participation and helps facilitate compliance.



The Role of Technology in Communication

These days, you have a variety of technology tools at your disposal to communicate more easily: your community website, FirstService Residential Connect™, mass communication capabilities, email, social media and virtual conferences. Here are some tips for using these tools.

Your Community's Website. Your community website can be a great way to keep residents informed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we understand that in-person community events and activities may be temporarily placed on hold. However, it is important to keep your community updated on your website whether the events are virtual or in-person. Policy changes, COVID-19 updates, and emergency instructions should be posted as well. This will also enable members of your association to stay connected with the community anytime and from any device. Residents should have access to forms and documents, including meeting minutes and financial statements. In addition, the website should give residents the option of sharing contact information for a community directory and making payments. Keep your website updated, and make sure it addresses the unique requirements of your community. According to Judy Ziner, vice president at FirstService Residential, "As good as the technology can be, you still have to know what your community needs and be ready to change as it changes."

FirstService Residential Connect. Stay connected! FirstService Residential Connect is an essential virtual tool to utilize, especially during these unprecedented times. This proprietary property management software platform was created by FirstService Residential to deliver exceptional service and help streamline communication for board members and the management team. The idea is to connect with the community at the touch of a button. The platform provides managers and board members easy access to the status of work orders, payments and violations. Managers and board members can easily view community documents, including financial summaries and policies. Connect also enables the onsite staff to effectively manage the services that keep your residents happy: amenity reservations, concierge services, valet parking, visitor management and package tracking.

For residents, Connect is vital now more than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. Residents can communicate virtually with their property manager, board members or neighbors; pay association fees; update account information and so much more. Connect is a one-stop-shop for community updates, service requests and reservations, account management, and access to the community calendar and directory. These management tools will empower your residents, board and community! To learn more about how your community can benefit from FirstService Residential Connect, visit www.fsresidential.com/connect today.

Mass communication tools. An advanced mass communication system will enable you or your management company to easily provide instructions during a crisis and to inform residents of meetings and other important information via email or recorded voice message. If you are using voice messages, be sure to keep them to no more than 30 seconds each.

Email. When communicating by email, you should never use a personal or work email address. Instead, board members should establish email addresses that are used exclusively for association business. Always maintain a professional tone and never discuss legal matters in an email. Keep in mind that if it's something you wouldn't be willing to say face to face, you shouldn't write it in an email either.

Media. Media such as newsletters are a good way to keep residents informed and engaged. Social media can be tricky to manage, so think carefully before engaging online. If you choose to use social media, be sure to monitor it closely. "Not all properties have a resource to manage it," says Ziner. To handle media sensibly, first determine your purpose. Is it to expand awareness of your community's brand, to build community spirit, to keep members informed or all of these? Once you know why you want to use social media channels to communicate, establish ownership. Who will monitor it, respond to comments and alert others who need to know? You may need to have more than one person manage it.

Create a media policy that specifies what can be published and by whom. Ziner recommends creating social media accounts even on channels you don't intend to use. "If someone else opens an account with your community name, you can't control it," she says, "so get control of anything close to your community's name first."

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Virtual Conferences. Virtual conferences aren't a new concept, but now more than ever, it's crucial to understand and utilize virtual conferencing platforms for communication purposes. There is an array of virtual conference platforms to use, such as [Zoom](#), [Teams](#), [WebEx](#), [GoToMeeting](#) and more. Each platform has its pros and cons, so it's up to you to decide which platform best fits your association's needs. While virtual conferences typically aren't the norm for board meetings, many boards are moving to them to keep business going even in the age of social distancing. Regardless of the meeting's venue, it's essential to maintain meeting protocol during this time. Implement these steps to conduct a successful board meeting, no matter where you are!

First, designate a host to run the meeting and keep it on a steady track. This is usually your board president or someone who has experience conducting board meetings. During virtual conferences, board members should stick to the agenda. Focusing on the topics, while keeping all discourse civil, is necessary to achieve a successful meeting. Allowing all board members to speak and share their opinions openly before sharing a second opinion will allow for a smooth conversation. Remember to mute yourself when others are speaking to avoid any background noise or distraction. Ensure that questions are being directed to the host to avoid any confusion. In doing so, board members should always display proper etiquette. This includes body language cues, eye contact, and answering questions when appropriate. Board members should be polite and assume positive intent when others have the floor. If your board uses Robert's Rules of Order for in-person meetings, continue that practice online. Finally, remember to make your words and time count. Recording the conference is a conducive way to reference the topics of discussion. [Check out these ultimate tips](#) to help you look and sound great during virtual conferences.



Crisis Communication

The most critical time for your association to have a solid communication plan is during a crisis. After all, if you haven't communicated your emergency preparedness strategy to residents and staff, lives and property could be at risk. "Without a plan, you will stumble," warns Ziner. "During an emergency, people need to rely on a well-thought-out plan." To make sure that everyone knows what to do during a crisis, follow these 3 communication tips:

1. Communicate your emergency preparedness plan all year long. Reiterate your emergency preparedness plan at regular intervals to ensure awareness. During a crisis, it's important to keep residents calm and accurately informed. "Tell residents in advance where to look for information during an emergency," Grimes advises, and use a range of communication channels, so you're sure to reach everyone. That way, residents will be informed, prepared, and understand the protocols and procedures being set into place.

2. Implement mass communication tools.

As mentioned earlier, having reliable mass communication tools is crucial during a crisis. You should also manage residents' expectations about the kind of information they can expect to receive from you. "There's a high dependency on phones during emergencies," explains McCaw, "so be sure you're not clogging the phone lines by repeating information that residents can get elsewhere." Ensure that the information you are sharing to residents is accurate and useful. Not only will this centralize the message, but it will also prevent the spread of misinformation. This is key for keeping calm during a crisis.

3. Spend time training onsite staff. Scheduled reminders and drills will help keep your onsite staff prepared. Of course, if you work with a professional property management company, it will be the company's responsibility to keep staff adequately trained. Work with local emergency management workers, too, since they will know how to prepare for any crisis that arises.



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There's no doubt that communication plays a major role in how well your community association operates, but getting it right can be one of your board's biggest challenges. Follow the recommendations in this guide, and you'll be well on your way toward making your community better than ever. If you need help putting together an effective communication program, contact [FirstService Residential](#).



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About FirstService Residential

FirstService Residential is the Illinois expert and North America's property management leader, partnering with more than 8,000 communities across the U.S. and Canada. HOAs, community associations, condos and strata corporations rely on our extensive experience, resources and local expertise to maximize their property values and enhance their residents' lifestyles. Dedicated to making a difference, every day, we go above and beyond to deliver exceptional service.

FirstService Residential is a subsidiary of FirstService Corporation (FSV), a North American leader in the property services sector. Find out how we can help your community thrive. Visit www.fsresidential.com.



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