

Lesson Learned: Reactivating Foreclosed Properties Can be Costly!

What Occurred: In May 2010 we were notified of water damage to a residence. The District was notified by a real estate broker who told them that there was water coming out of the control/fire box on the water heater.

The District had previously sent out an employee to unlock the water meter but this was not the employee's regular job. There was a foreclosure sign on the property stating that the water was not to be turned on as the residence was un-occupied. The District's policy is to only turn on the water when there is someone present at the residence and if it is currently occupied. The District employee thought that he was to unlock the water meter and turn the water back on.

What Resulted: When the water heater connection burst, water flowed into the storage room, an adjacent room, down the hallway and into a bathroom. Additionally, water flowed down a hole, intended for plumbing, and entered into the crawlspace. Water soaked through the carpeting and destroyed the padding underneath. The walls were damp in a bedroom, hallway and bathroom. Sections of the walls had to be removed. When the water flowed into the bathroom it also went down into a floor vent. Inside the crawlspace the insulation around the ductwork was drenched and the water also reached under the vapor barrier. A twenty foot section of ductwork had to be removed and replaced.

Direct Costs: The total paid loss was **\$68,000**.

Indirect Costs: The District's labor and expense in cleanup coordination, interviews, and document gathering was estimated to total **30** hours for an indirect/non insurable cost of approximately **\$1,000**

Contributing Factors:

1. An employee that was not normally assigned to unlock a meter was sent out to the premises instead of an employee that was normally assigned to this job.
2. No one representing the property owner was onsite when the water was turned back on.

Root Cause:

1. The District sent out a newer employee who knew how to do the task but did not receive clear communication on what exactly his task was to be. He thought that to "turn the meter back on" meant "unlock the meter and turn the water supply on as well".



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Best Practices to Consider - Lessons Learned to Prevent Recurrence:

1. The property owner needs to provide the District with clear communication on the operation to be performed. The District employee should understand if the meter is to be a) unlocked and the service remained off, or b) unlocked and the service turned back on.
2. Make sure the residence or business is occupied, or the property owner or their agent is onsite at the time the water service is turned back on.
3. If the property owner or their agent is not onsite, but has requested that the meter be unlocked and the service turned back on;
 - a. The meter can be unlocked but the service left off. A door tag should be left informing the owner/agent of the meter's status, and the owner/agent can then turn the service on or off as needed.
 - b. If the District instructs the employee to unlock the meter and turn the service on even though no one is onsite;
 - i. The employee should slowly open the meter valve allowing water to slowly fill the plumbing.
 - ii. The employee should watch the meter to verify that water usage stops after a short duration. If water use does not stop, the meter should be turned off, but unlocked, and a door tag left informing the owner/agent of a possible leak. The owner should also be immediately notified by phone of a possible leak and that some water damage may have occurred when the meter was turned on in accordance to their instructions.
4. Before turning the water back on, instruct the person inside the building or residence to turn on water fixtures to relive air from the system.
5. After turning on the water service, the owner/agent should flush water from all of the faucets to clear any air in the system.
6. After turning on the water service, the owner/agent should inspect the entire residence or building for leaks, especially the laundry room and water heater(s).
7. Instruct District employees to read any notices posted on or around the premises before reactivating the water service. If they have any questions they should call the appropriate District supervisor for clarification.
8. Ensure that each district employee is properly trained, not only on the task at hand but also on the Districts policies regarding a particular task.

Overcommunicate for Success, Undercommunicate and Have a Mess!

For additional information about this and other Water and Sewer risk management programs please contact Leah Vergosen at 425-452-9750 or leahv@wsrmp.org

This claim has been sanitized for risk management training purposes.