

Realtor Safety Tips for REO Properties



By
Mark Powell

My background in education and law enforcement has taught me to always hold safety as my top concern – a mindset that has yielded success while heading the REO department in the Southern California brokerage Discovery Property Group, Inc. During my REO experience, I have worked with properties with varying degrees of danger. Some are trouble-free and safe enough to qualify for day care facilities, while other properties have been so fraught with peril that I began to enforce guidelines for my agents to adhere by out of concern for their safety.

This article intends to share some important areas of safety for those who work with distressed properties, especially licensed agents, and suggest precautions to ensure safety for success while conducting your business. Topics of concern include initial tasks with occupied properties, hazards when accessing the vacant houses, and maintaining a secure property until closing.

During initial tasks for a distressed property, an agent may need to work with an occupied property. Understand that any person living there is likely to have an emotional attachment to the property and, possibly burdened by financial stress, may view you as an antagonist to their well-being. Some tenants have not come to terms with their separation from the property, with which they may have

developed a relationship over a period of years. Accordingly, be prepared for the possibility of occupants acting irrationally out of frustration or anger while performing tasks such as occupancy checks, cash-for-keys negotiations and eviction proceedings. It is best to avoid confrontation by not representing yourself as an enemy. During occupancy checks, it is advisable to stay clear of tenants. If you understand their perspective, you can perform initial tasks as non-intrusively as possible and avoid serious problems. While performing tasks on inhabited properties:

- Alert someone of the address you are going to, and instruct them to take action if they have not heard back from you after a specified time period
- Visit the properties close to noon when there is daylight and you are less likely to run into occupants
- Be observant – check the area before leaving your vehicle and look for signs of potential issues, such as dog houses and people visible through windows
- Carry a cell phone and program it to dial 911 at the touch of a button (speed-dial)
- Consider carrying target-specific mace or pepper spray in your pocket for a worst-case physical confrontation by tenant or dogs

- Pay attention to exits and carefully consider the best place to park your vehicle
- During lockouts, leave as quickly as possible after the sheriff departs
- After eviction proceedings, have a qualified contractor re-key and secure the property, keeping careful attention to securing windows and other openings where someone could gain entry
- Have a plan should confrontation occur

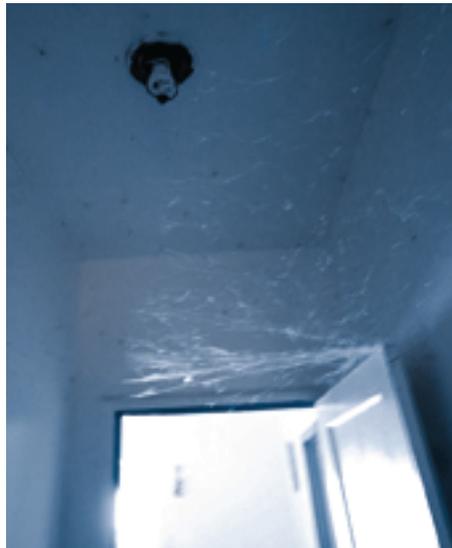
Apart from safety concerns regarding occupied homes are issues associated with the property itself, such as environmental hazards and structural problems. Some properties may have mold or fungus problems which can pose a serious danger or cause irritation to the respiratory system. Others may be infested with spiders, ants or other animals. My business partner was hospitalized for more than a week due to a spider bite he received in an arachnid-overrun home. Structural problems can also pose a danger, including damaged flooring, broken glass, cracked slabs and uneven stairs. One REO property I was assigned had such damage to the second-story balcony floor that my foot went straight through it when I stepped out to take pictures of the unit's view. When entering a distressed property:

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- Wear protective clothing including pants, long sleeves, closed-toed shoes and even gloves if necessary
- Use a respirator if you suspect mold or see significant water damage
- Bring a flashlight and extra batteries for unlighted areas
- Watch your step, looking for uneven ground, damaged flooring and unsecured handrails

Even after confirming vacancy, keep safety as a top priority. Sometimes the owner will move back in or vagrants will break into the property. Whenever working with distressed properties keep a notebook and camera to document any issue that may arise so you can accurately inform the asset manager or seller of any concern, safety or otherwise. Keep yourself safe

by planning ahead and following these guidelines and you will accomplish your tasks successfully. 🕒



This hallway was overrun by hundreds of live spiders.

Mark Powell is Broker/CEO of the San Diego real estate company, Discovery Property Group, Inc.



A dangerous hole caused by water damage to a second story balcony of an REO home.



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