

One of Polikoff's top tips: Find a reliable house sitter, someone who can visit your home while you are away to check on possible problems that pop up, such as plumbing leaks and storm damage.

Ideally, you can leave a key with someone you trust — a relative, friend or neighbor — who can enter your home once or twice a month to check on appliances, sinks, air-conditioning systems and other possible sources of problems. At the very least, have someone drive by and check the outside for signs of something wrong, including break-ins by people or infestations by pests.

Polikoff and other experienced snowbirds also recommend:

Remove all movable objects from porches and patios. Keep in mind a hurricane could turn them into dangerous projectiles that could damage your home or a neighbor's.

Close drapes and blinds. That helps keep strangers from peering in to see what you own and to discover signs you may be away.

Stop newspaper and mail deliveries. Stacked papers outside or a full mailbox may attract unwanted attention.

Of course, there are also plenty of precautions to be taken inside your condo or home before you leave, experts say.

"Water leaks and floods are among the biggest problems I see with seasonal residents," said Tracey Schnaitman, a community manager with VIP Property Management Specialists in Sunrise.

Schnaitman, who has been working with South Florida residents and snowbirds since 1981, has seen it all. He says air conditioners tend to be a big culprit for problems that crop up while people are away on vacation or extended visits.

She also suggests setting your air conditioning to about 80 degrees, enough to keep bills down and to prevent mold build-up on walls and carpets. In older homes with humidistats, change the setting to read "60," which will pull the humidity out of the air and also protect against mold and mildew.

It's also a good idea to have your air-conditioning system checked by a contractor before you leave for months at a time, or at least shortly before summer and winter begin.

Other offenders for water leaks and floods are water heaters, toilets and sinks.

"I always recommend turning off the water to your home, shut it down," Schnaitman said. Fortunately, the process is easy enough for most people to do it themselves, she said. For most older condos and homes, the water valve is located inside the home, such as garages or utility rooms. Typically, there is a round valve that needs to be turned to the right until it is tightly closed. Once done, turn on your sink and bathtub valves to make sure no water comes out and to release air pressure within the pipes.

Schnaitman also strongly suggests that residents drain the hot water heater to prevent leaks or floods caused by a faulty drain pan system or ruptured water heater tank. "A leak from the water

heater can leave you with an inch-worth of water build-up on your floors when you get home, and a ruptured tank can dump 30 to 40 gallons of water into your home that can flood out to neighbors next to you and below you,” she said.

You cannot guard against every problem, which is why it also may be wise to leave a key with the condo association in case someone needs to enter your home during an emergency, such as water flooding out of your residence. Otherwise, the association has the right to hire a locksmith to gain access and pass the related charges to the owner.

If you don’t feel comfortable leaving a key with the association, consider leaving a copy with a trusted neighbor and let the association know in advance who has it and provide contact information.

With hurricane season approaching, it may be a good idea to put up your shutters if you expect to be gone for a long time. But check with your association for possible city ordinances or governing rules that only allow for shutters to be put up shortly before a storm approaches, and require them to be taken down shortly after it passes.

For snowbirds, it’s a matter of being proactive, rather than reactive,” Schnaitman said.

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