



How secure are your master keys?

Two recent events in Toronto have called into question the security of master keys in condo buildings.

BY SCOTT HILL

In one case, a Riverdale condo is facing a bill of \$30,000 to \$40,000 to re-key its building after its master key was snatched from its fire safety box and used to steal a bike secured in a storage locker, according to a CBC news report.

In the other case, a locksmith company in Toronto has been advertising that it will copy security locks for condo owners. In addition, a quick check of Google reveals several chat forums in Toronto and the U.S. where condo owners are advising each other of potential locksmiths that will ignore the instructions, 'DO NOT DUPLICATE,' emblazoned on these keys. These owners are also comparing notes on how to approach the locksmith for the best results.

These two events highlight the importance of protecting master keys to condo buildings from unauthorized duplication and use.

Preventing unauthorized duplication

It comes as a considerable surprise to

most condo managers and board members that those three magic words printed on their building's master keys — DO NOT DUPLICATE — are merely a request to all locksmiths to respect the condo's wishes. Hard as this may be to believe, there are no laws or rules in Ontario that prevent the locksmith from duplicating condo keys without proper authorization.

Obviously, this trend should be very alarming to property managers and boards of directors, who expend considerable effort in ensuring the safety and security of their property and its residents. So, is there anything that can be done to rectify this issue?

First, it is recommended that condos only work with reputable locksmiths. Most, if not all, professional management companies maintain a list of preferred contractors who they know to be both reliable and ethical in their work and pricing. If a condo becomes aware that its locksmith company is copying keys

without proper authorization, the condo may want to take its business to a company that abides by the rules, even if they are unspoken.

Second, experts within the locksmith industry recommend using restricted keyway locks. The reason that companies are able to copy keys with the 'DO NOT DUPLICATE' instruction is because the key blanks used are readily available to most locksmiths. As their name suggests, restricted keyway locks restricts access to the key blanks to the condo's authorized locksmith.

To copy a restricted keyway lock, a person would have to identify the condo's locksmith, and then convince him or her to produce a duplicate. Given that this locksmith has a business relationship with the management company, it is unlikely that the locksmith will copy the key without proper authorization.

But these precautions may be for naught if a condo's master keys are poorly secured.



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Preventing unauthorized use

Security audits for Ontario condos frequently find master keys stored in fire safety boxes in condo vestibules. These areas are considered semi-private, but are accessible to anyone. Occasionally, these lock boxes are not very sturdy and can be pried open.

Master keys should be considered a critical asset of the corporation and, as such, have additional layers (or protection) surrounding them. If a condo has 24-hour security on site, it's recommended that the master keys be stored within the security guard's line of sight, as well as inside the lobby (as opposed to the vestibule). A condo would also be well-served to create a master key log, where anyone taking the key must sign it out and back in — establishing the dates and times of use and the person responsible.

If there is any suspicion that the integrity of a condo's master key system has been breached, condos should discuss re-keying. The risks associated with misplaced master keys are significant — ranging from simple break-ins/thefts to crimes against people (assault or even worse) within residents' units.

If a condo is considering re-keying, it's strongly recommended that it undertakes a security audit to ensure that there are no further vulnerabilities before coordinating the project with a reputable locksmith professional and educating staff on proper key control policies.

It's also worth noting that security audits for new condos commonly recommend the re-keying of master keys used for restricted common elements. That's because the first board of directors usually does not have any way to determine how many keys were provided to contractors during the building and warranty phase of the condo.

Condos can avoid having to re-key by maintaining the integrity of their master keys through measures aimed at preventing their unauthorized duplication and use. □

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