

Lock Up Security

From deterring crimes to saving precious time and money, housing managers depend on centralized key-management systems.

By Michael Paquette

Most people have lost or misplaced their keys at one time or another. But imagine you have issued more than 10,000 different keys, and it is your responsibility to know exactly to whom those keys are assigned and to make sure that they are being used by the right person.

That's the job most housing managers have. With thousands of housing units that can turn over on a base several times in several years, it can be an overwhelming task for those overseeing a lock-and-key system. Housing and barracks managers face a huge challenge in key management as part of their charge to provide security and safety for their residents.

Compounding that key tracking challenge is the necessity of contending with many types of locks, all of which cannot be changed to ensure security without the hassle and considerable expense of continually installing new lock cores. But some housing managers have learned that investing time and money into developing a central, standardized key-management system can save money and headaches, as well as provide them with confidence in the security of the property.

Two such housing managers, Steve Maxwell and 1st Lt. Sean Dalton, said that the two goals of a good key-management system are simplicity and security. Having thousands of keys and using dozens of different locks can make re-keying and tracking a nightmare. Using standardized locks and a reliable method to track who is using specific keys where makes the constant changeover much easier.



Managing keys at the largest single dorm in the world, Bancroft Hall at the U.S. Naval Academy, is simple and streamlined thanks to a centralized key-management system.

At Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Maxwell, the quality control manager with Actus Lend Lease, will continue instituting a new key-management program started several years ago as the company upgrades all the housing. He oversees maintenance of 4,200 units that house about 12,000 residents. The new key-management system has been installed in about half of the houses, with more being added every month.

The system features locks that can be re-keyed up to four times, simply by turning a "step" key; no locksmith is needed. All keys are given a unique serial number that can be tracked via the system's secure, Web-accessed database. The system was purchased from InstaKey Lock Corporation of Denver.

When a tenant moves in, he or she is assigned a key with a serial number and

that information is input into the database. The database indicates who lives in each unit and who has the keys. If a key is lost, instead of incurring the cost of a locksmith, Maxwell can change a lock merely by inserting and twisting a step key into the existing core to re-key and secure the house. He then orders new keys online.

"It provides great security for the residents and increases our ability to serve them," said Maxwell. "The best recent example was a resident whose husband had been deployed recently and whose home was broken into. Within 15 minutes, we were able to have the resident's locks changed."

Key-tracking systems also have been used elsewhere when investigating crimes. At one military base, when a crime was committed in a family hous-

ing unit, the perpetrator used a key to enter the home. A database was used to determine who had access to the keys. It gave the investigators an instant suspect list and led to an arrest.

A "real time" online tracking system, such as the one Maxwell uses, also deters individuals from keeping keys when they move out. If a key is missing, it can be identified by a serial number. "One of the biggest issues is people walking away with keys or losing keys," said Maxwell. "But with this system, we can go online and find out who it belongs to and take the appropriate action."

Not Just for Family Housing

Key-management problems equally affect barracks and dormitory communities in the same way as family housing. The same key-management program in use at Fort Campbell also has been installed at Bancroft Hall at the U.S.

Naval Academy. This 1.4-million-square-foot building is the largest single dormitory in the world. It can house up to 4,300 midshipmen and 300 staff. With 30 different companies on 40 floors, the academy was able to organize the system using one master key per company.

"The problem was that there was no consistency," said Bancroft Hall 1st Lt. Sean Dalton, the manager of the facility. "We used many random locks and keys. The system now is very simple; we are able to change the entire system with the turn of another key."

The dormitory suffers many lost and misplaced keys. Dalton tracks lost keys and replacement keys by using a secure online database provided by a key-control system provider.

"I don't have to develop my own database or software—I just provide the input," said Dalton. "By logging on to my tracking report, I can see which keys

belong to which room instantly." Students are not the only ones prone to losing keys. As Maxwell observed, a common problem that military community managers encounter is that once soldiers return to base after being deployed for several months, many have lost their keys.

The manager then is faced with either making new keys or replacing hundreds of the locks. Having a standardized system that can be re-keyed instantly simplifies the solution. A process that could have taken days and cost hundreds or thousands of dollars has virtually no added cost and can be fixed in a few hours. It provides managers peace of mind in an era of heightened security worries. ■

Michael Paquette is a freelance writer and communications consultant who lives in Denver.

1/2 horizontal

Clark Pinnacle