

More Than an Amenity: Connectivity Takes Center Stage

The pandemic has laid bare the critical importance of network infrastructure and the importance of the multifamily industry's relationship with connectivity providers.

By Kevin Donnelly / *National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC)*

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that the ongoing long haul to seamless connectivity in multifamily broadband has been worth the effort and expense. Never before has the importance of a community amenity been more evident.

As COVID-19 spread across the nation and stay-at-home orders were issued, millions of Americans sought refuge in their homes in apartment communities. These communities quickly became round-the-clock offices, schools and entertainment hubs. If demand for blazing-fast internet was at an all-time high prior to the pandemic, it became an absolute necessity during it.

More than just serving residents during these unprecedented times, connectivity was also key to helping multifamily firms maintain operational continuity amid office shutdowns and remote workforce and social distancing constraints.

The lasting effects of the pandemic on home, school and work life are yet unclear, but a number of pandemic lessons cannot be unlearned. Always-on connectivity is only going to grow in importance in the post-COVID-19 world as multifamily considers operational resilience in a new light.

CONNECTIVITY SPEEDS INNOVATION

The pandemic is shaping up to have some long-lasting effects on apartment design and

operations, and both operators and service providers should prepare for major changes in how they deliver connectivity across multifamily communities.

From rethinking unit and amenity space to better accommodate working from home and e-learning to providing touch-free access control around doors, package lockers, elevators and amenity spaces, apartment firms are finding many of their assumptions about what residents value and how the business works challenged.

Already, there's been a swift embrace of virtual and self-guided tours as firms look for ways to maintain business continuity while protecting the health of their prospects, residents and employees. Moreover, self-service solutions for things such as packages, maintenance and amenity scheduling have paid off many times over as operators try to balance delivering the services and perks residents want and expect with skeleton crews on site.

A heightened focus on cleanliness and indoor air quality also has taken hold. Residents and prospects have always wanted it, but the expectation is clearly much higher thanks to the pandemic. Multifamily firms are investing in new technologies to clean and sanitize their properties, including the use of UV-C lights inside of heating and cooling air systems. It's easy to see how smart technologies may play an integral role in the control and management of these new cleaning and circulation solutions moving forward.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IS EXPOSED

If you're a multifamily developer or an operator who long ago sought to future-proof properties, invest in fiber networks and build connectivity considerations into properties from the ground up, job well done. Those investments are paying dividends.

It's important to point to multifamily connectivity successes during this time, but it's equally important to acknowledge that, for many properties and their residents, the picture isn't as rosy. For far too many multifamily firms involved in the development and operation of affordable, rural or low-income properties, finding service providers willing to serve them can be a challenge, leading to limited service options and limited speed.

At the consumer level, affordability of service remains an obstacle to adoption for some residents. Even when owners are successful in bringing several service providers to a property, in far too many cases, low-income Americans still cannot afford to connect.

During the pandemic, what's been referred to as the "homework gap" took on critical importance: Millions of students find themselves unable to participate in virtual learning because their families lack access to the internet. In fact, in some cases, school buses outfitted with Wi-Fi hot spots needed to be deployed to low-income neighborhoods, rural communities and U.S. tribal lands so kids could connect to the internet for school.

This is the latest sign that the digital divide in this country remains significant, with the potential to do long-term damage on a number of levels. As a nation, Americans must do better. Collaboration between policymakers, property owners and service providers of all kinds will be required to erase the line between those who have connectivity and those who don't.

MORE TECHNOLOGY NEEDED TO IMPROVE CONNECTIVITY

Though the pandemic exposed some shortcomings of some multifamily industry telecom policies and practices, it also laid bare the reality that multifamily living is going to change in the post-pandemic world.

Systems and services have automated at a rapid pace during the pandemic and when faster, cheaper and more convenient systems are deployed, people don't go back to slower, more expensive and less convenient. These advances underscore the critical nature of multifamily's network infrastructure and the importance of relationships and partnerships with providers.

Seamless curb-to-couch connectivity is the key to powering many systems and services in today's apartments. However, any number of constraints can make achieving this kind of strong and consistent connectivity difficult without additional technology. Many apartment firms look to distributed antenna systems, network extenders or even bulk service and communitywide Wi-Fi to get the kind of connectivity and coverage they need and their residents want. Yet those aren't the only answers.

Some recent technology developments offer even more

promise with Citizens Broadband Radio Service (CBRS), private long-term evolution (LTE) and other in-building network solutions becoming more readily available. These technologies aren't the answer for every property, but they may become even more attractive as 5G technology and service becomes more common across the consumer landscape and residents expect that same level of speed and service when they walk through their communities' doors.

Apartment operators and broadband providers will need to continue to work together to identify and deploy the right technology solutions to deliver high-level connectivity at every property. The COVID-19 pandemic shows us that stakes have never been higher.

Connectivity is no longer just about resident satisfaction; now, it's about providing a critical lifeline and access. It's about being able to ensure all residents can work and go to school and stay healthy at home while maintaining continuity when it comes to community management, maintenance and operations. Connectivity is the key to resilience for the multifamily industry. ❖

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The advertisement features the COS SYSTEMS logo at the top. Below it, the text reads "COS Service Zones" and "Know Where Your Customers Are Before You Build Your Networks". The main content is a white box titled "Demand Aggregation - The Complete Solution" with a checklist of seven items: "Divide your area into competing fiberhoods", "Survey the community", "Set fiberhood take-rate targets", "Sign up customers before build-out", "Build where take-rate targets are met", "Deploy incrementally based on ROI", and "Real-time data from YOUR customers". To the right of the list are two circular callouts: "27% TAKE RATE" and "54% TAKE RATE". At the bottom, the website "www.cossystems.com" and phone number "800-562-1730" are provided.