

Pet-Inclusive Housing Initiative

PRESENTED BY

Michelson Found Animals 

Operator Case Study

The Company: Oculus Realty

Overview: Multifamily Housing Operator Embraces No-Restrictions Pet Policies, Welcomes All Cats and Dogs

For Oculus Realty, being different is part of the norm, and the company takes pride in being on the leading edge in multifamily. Oculus is certainly one of the leaders in the industry when it comes to the pets living in its communities, which stretch across the metro D.C. area.

K. David Meit, CPM, Principal of Oculus Realty, decided to drop breed and weight restrictions for dogs on the company's properties in the spring of 2019, thanks in part to the efforts of Meit's daughter years earlier. Meit had never owned a dog, but his daughter crafted a compelling PowerPoint presentation in 2017 about the kind of dog they should get, and why, convincing Meit to welcome the family's first furry friend.

Meit joked that after that presentation, he "got religion" when it came to canines. This sent him and the Oculus team down a path toward greater inclusiveness of pets and a stronger position in the metro D.C. multifamily market.

Challenge | Creating Stronger Communities

With corporate values including care, workmanship, initiative, creativity and integrity, creating strong and vibrant communities with strong resident retention is one of Oculus Realty's leading goals.

"I realized that animal lovers tend to be really great community builders because it's in their nature," Meit said. "They go to dog parks and interact with each other. So, we realized that if we created an environment that really welcomed dogs, that would create a fair amount of 'stickiness,' or resident retention, in our portfolio."

Only a fraction of multifamily communities have lifted breed and weight restrictions entirely, but Oculus ultimately decided that lifting restrictions was more in line with its vision for its communities.

Solution | Creating a Home for Pets

Meit admits the first step in easing restrictions was to educate himself and his team on dog breeds. Before long, they concluded that there aren't bad pets or bad breeds, just irresponsible owners.

"I realized that if we're doing our job in screening our residents, we're going to be just fine with welcoming more dogs to our properties," Meit explained. "So, we flipped this switch three years ago by eliminating restrictions, and we've never had a problem since then."

Meit also discovered that property insurance was not an obstacle despite the belief in the industry that insurance and liability requirements are part of the reason communities need to have restrictions.

"We've done a lot of business with Travelers and Hartford Mutual, which are big in habitational insurance," Meit said. "They didn't have breed restrictions. I used to hear from my colleagues that it's all about liability and things like that, but we came to find out that's really not true."

Getting associates on board was not an issue for Oculus either, as Meit quickly found that his teammates shared his pet-inclusive values, and his company took an energetic, all-encompassing approach to pet-friendliness.

One of the first steps was creating the infrastructure required to be pet-inclusive, such as dog runs, parks and washing stations, all of which can be difficult to find in communities situated in densely populated cities.

Oculus also expanded its pet services and events, partnering with third-party vendors and local businesses, such as Bark Buildings, to assist with pet-related events and pet concierge services.

Oculus also worked with a local Petco to bring trainers onsite to help residents most effectively manage their pets.

To prevent waste issues, Oculus used PooPrints and its pet DNA registry, which makes it possible to discover the source of neglected waste, as well as find the owner of lost pets. These companies provide valuable services to residents while enabling the Oculus team to focus on the other demands of their jobs.

"Our management staff and our leasing staff are busy providing customer service and renting apartments," Meit said. "So, for what I truly believe is a nominal fee, we get pet services as well."

Result | Stronger Communities That Stand Out

The lack of breed and weight restrictions and Oculus' pet-inclusive environment have translated to a better market position as well as a boost to Oculus' overall retention.

"You want to create that stickiness because people want to feel comfortable where they live," Meit said. "They're not going to want to move unless they really have to. We get inquiries all the time about breed restrictions. And frankly, it's been a boon to our business because a lot of our competitors have them — and we don't."

Oculus opted to move forward with a one-time non-refundable pet fee coupled with low pet rent. This not only made things easier for Meit's team, but it also added significantly to Oculus' net operating income (NOI).

"I know the one measurable KPI is revenue, and that's been fantastic," Meit said. "We played around early on with the pet deposit and what the pet rents would be, and we also chose to do it a little bit differently than everybody else. Literally, these fees go right down to NOI as we rarely see damages due to pets."