

Vacant Property Stabilization Guide

*Protecting an inherited home before major decisions are made —
Colorado edition.*

Vacant homes deteriorate faster than most families expect.

Most inherited properties sit vacant for weeks or months before any major decisions are made. That's a reasonable and often necessary pause — but a vacant property carries risks that an occupied one doesn't. Insurance lapses, pipes freeze, water intrudes, and landscaping deteriorates. Small problems become large ones quietly.

This guide walks through the practical steps for stabilizing a vacant inherited property during the estate process — protecting the asset, reducing liability, and keeping your options open regardless of what you ultimately decide to do with it.

OBSERVED REALITY

Many homeowner's insurance policies reduce coverage or void it entirely after 30 to 60 days of vacancy. This is one of the most consistently overlooked risks in inherited property situations — and one of the most easily addressed if caught early.

PART ONE

Insurance: The First Thing to Address

Standard homeowner's insurance policies are written for occupied homes. Most contain vacancy clauses that reduce or eliminate coverage after a defined period — commonly 30 to 60 days. Some policies void coverage for specific perils (fire, vandalism, water damage) once the property is vacant, even if the premium continues to be paid.

INSURANCE ACTIONS

- Notify the homeowner's insurance carrier of the owner's death immediately
- Request a copy of the current policy and review the vacancy clause
- Ask specifically: what coverage remains during vacancy, and for how long?
- Request a vacant property endorsement or rider if available
- If standard coverage is reduced, obtain a standalone vacant property policy
- Confirm coverage for: fire, water damage, vandalism, liability, and theft
- Set a calendar reminder to review coverage every 30 days during the vacancy

OBSERVED REALITY

Vacant property insurance is more expensive than standard homeowner's coverage — but significantly less expensive than an uninsured fire or water loss. The premium difference is rarely worth the risk of going without.

PART TWO

Physical Security and Access Control

Vacant properties attract attention — from curious neighbors, former acquaintances, and occasionally from people looking for an opportunity. Access control isn't about paranoia; it's about maintaining clear control over who enters the property during a period when multiple family members, contractors, and estate parties may have keys.

SECURITY CHECKLIST

- Rekey or replace all exterior locks — obtain and track all key copies
- Install a lockbox for controlled contractor/advisor access
- Consider a smart lock for remote access management and entry logging
- Install basic security cameras at entry points (doorbell camera minimum)
- Verify all windows lock properly — replace any broken or non-locking hardware
- Secure any detached structures: garages, sheds, outbuildings
- Post 'No Trespassing' signage if appropriate for the neighborhood
- Arrange for regular visual checks — neighbor, property manager, or scheduled visits
- Hold mail and packages, or arrange for forwarding or pickup
- Remove obvious vacancy signals: piled mail, unlit interiors, unkempt exterior

PART THREE

Colorado-Specific: Freeze, Thaw, and Water Risks

Colorado's climate creates specific risks for vacant properties that don't apply in milder states. Freeze-thaw cycles, significant temperature swings, and mountain-area snowfall and ice can all cause serious damage to an unmonitored vacant home.

WINTER AND WATER PROTECTION

- Set the thermostat to a minimum of 55°F — never turn heat completely off in winter
- Locate and know how to shut off the main water supply
- Insulate exposed pipes in unheated spaces: crawl spaces, garages, exterior walls

- Drain irrigation systems before winter — improperly winterized systems burst
- Check for active roof leaks or ice damming conditions before first snowfall
- Clear gutters before winter — ice dams form when gutters are blocked
- Inspect the water heater: if draining the home, drain and winterize it properly
- Know where the main shutoff is — and make sure it actually works

OBSERVED REALITY

A single frozen and burst pipe in a vacant home can cause \$30,000 to \$80,000 in water damage. The heat bill for keeping a vacant property at 55°F through a Colorado winter is rarely more than \$300 to \$600. The math is straightforward.

MOUNTAIN PROPERTY ADDITIONS

- Account for road and driveway access during snow season — can you reach the property?
- Confirm the roof load capacity relative to historical snowfall in that area
- Check for wildfire mitigation compliance — defensible space, vegetation clearance
- Confirm well and septic systems are winterized if the property will be unoccupied seasonally
- Review wildfire insurance availability — policies in some mountain areas are non-renewable

Ongoing Maintenance During Vacancy

Basic maintenance during vacancy isn't about improving the property — it's about preventing deterioration. The goal is to deliver the property in the same or better condition than it was at the time of death, regardless of how long the estate process takes.

EXTERIOR MAINTENANCE

- Mow and maintain the lawn — an unkempt yard signals vacancy and invites attention
- Clear snow from walkways and driveway (liability and appearance)
- Maintain landscaping at a basic level — overgrowth signals neglect
- Check roof and gutters after major storms
- Remove any storm debris promptly
- Check that exterior lighting is functioning — timers add passive security

INTERIOR MONITORING

- Inspect the interior at least once every two weeks — more often in winter
- Check under sinks, around the water heater, and near appliances for moisture
- Verify the HVAC is functioning and filters are reasonably clean
- Check that no windows or doors have been opened by wind or intrusion
- Run water occasionally — standing water in traps evaporates and allows sewer gas intrusion
- Check the sump pump if the property has one — test it manually

Utility Management

UTILITY	RECOMMENDATION	RATIONALE
Heat/Gas	Keep on — 55°F minimum	Freeze protection; required for insurance in most policies
Electricity	Keep on	Powers security cameras, lighting timers, sump pump, monitoring devices
Water	Keep on, or shut off and drain if winterizing	Running water occasionally prevents sewer gas; shutoff required if winterizing
Internet	Consider keeping — or cancel	Needed if using smart locks, cameras, or remote monitoring; otherwise cancel

UTILITY	RECOMMENDATION	RATIONALE
Cable/Streaming	Cancel	No utility function in a vacant property
Landline	Cancel after retrieving the number if needed	Rarely needed; cancel to reduce costs

PART SIX

A Note on Contractors and Estimates

Vacant inherited properties are unfortunately a known target for unscrupulous contractors. An out-of-state executor, an emotionally exhausted family, a property that clearly hasn't been updated in years — these signals attract people whose estimates may not reflect honest pricing or scope.

CONTRACTOR CAUTION

- Get a minimum of three bids for any significant work
- Never pay more than 10–20% upfront for materials on any project
- Ask for a written scope of work before any payment changes hands
- Verify licensing through the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA)
- Ask for references from similar work completed in the past 12 months
- Do not let urgency — real or manufactured — push you into a single bid
- Be skeptical of any contractor who knocks on the door unsolicited
- Consult your real estate advisor before committing to major repair scopes

OBSERVED REALITY

Some of the most expensive mistakes in inherited property situations involve over-scope renovation contracts signed before the property was properly evaluated. Stabilization work should be conservative and targeted — not a renovation.

Questions about stabilizing a vacant inherited property?

Schedule a consultation with Brendan Gustafson. We can walk through the specific property, identify the highest-priority stabilization steps, and help you avoid the most common and costly mistakes during the vacancy period.

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