

Renter's Handbook

Your apartment must meet with state and local building codes, housing codes, health requirements, zoning ordinances, etc. These regulations set forth minimum requirements to make sure your apartment is a safe and healthy place to live. Run through the checklist below and see if you have some problems. If so, you may want to contact the Code Enforcement Department. You can obtain a copy of the housing code by stopping by the office of the Code Enforcement Department. The Housing Code Enforcement Department will not take sides. Their concern is only to enforce the Housing Code. Call them when you have problems with your apartment or house, and the landlord has refused your requests for repairs. Call them before you have missed a rent payment or damaged the premises. The purpose of the Housing Code Enforcement Program is answering tenant's complaints and inspecting all residential property within the city to make sure it is safe and healthy.

If you are fairly sure that there are violations, then check your lease to see if you are responsible to fix some of them. Usually, the tenant is responsible for a minimum of good housekeeping. In most cases, your landlord is responsible to correct housing code violations. If you have any doubts, seek help. Explain the problem to the landlord. He may not even know of the problem unless you point it out to him. You might want to mention that a code violation exists if you think one does. If the condition is not fixed within a reasonable time, remind the landlord again. If he still does not respond, then send a letter to the landlord listing all the problems and indicate a copy of the letter is being sent to the Code Enforcement Department. Make sure to send that copy and keep a copy for your records.

If the violation is a major one and presents serious danger to your health, safety and welfare, you should contact the housing officials immediately. A phone call is enough to start the process. Avoid general statements such as "the place is a mess". Be exact. If the roof leaks, say it. If the toilet does not flush, say it. Be specific about which rooms need to be fixed.

Usually within a day or two after the code Enforcement Department receives your complaint, an inspection will be made. If a genuine emergency exists, call and explain the situation. Often an inspection can be made the same day.

Once the apartment has been inspected, it is not likely the problem will be solved the next day. The Code Enforcement Department writes the landlord a letter listing all the violations found. A time limit is set for the landlord to make repairs. The time required varies according to the problem. The Department will usually follow-up and check to make sure everything is fixed. If this does not occur, keep in contact with the inspector so that they do not forget about you.

The landlord cannot evict you for requesting a housing inspection as long as violations exist and you have been paying your rent and there are no other problems affecting your right to live in the apartment.

Renter's Checklist

The following code questions should be consulted when viewing an apartment you are about to rent or the one you presently live in. They should give you a general idea on whether you need to call the housing officials. If you have any questions, feel free to contact the Code Enforcement Department.

Exterior and Common Areas

- Does your apartment hallway and/or stairway have natural or electric light at all times?
- Does the roof leak?
- Is the outside free of standing water and kept clean?
- Are there hand railings where there are three steps or more?
- Are the porches safe?
- Are there any holes, breaks, loose or rotting boards in the exterior walls or foundation?
- Are there sufficient garbage cans for the outside?

Windows and Doors

- Does every room have at least one window or skylight which can be opened, except bathroom, laundry, furnace, pantry, kitchenette, or utility room?
- Do the locks on all exterior doors work properly and will they insure your safety?
- Do you have two or more safe ways to get out of your apartment?
- Does wind or rain enter the dwelling through the doors or windows?
- Are there any broken windows?
- Do all the windows operate properly?
- Are there screens on all the windows?

Bathroom and Kitchen

- Does your kitchen have cabinets and shelves?
- Do the drains, toilets, sinks and other plumbing fixtures work well?
- If the bathroom has no window or skylight, is there a vent or fan to the outside that works properly?
- Does the bathroom and kitchen floor resist water and is it easy to keep clean and sanitary?
- Is the stove safe and in good repair?
- Are there times when the sinks, bathtubs and/or showers are not supplied with hot (120 degrees F. at any time needed) and cold running water?

Bedrooms

Can you get to the bathroom or other bedrooms without going through some else's bedroom?

Electric and Water

- Is your gas burning water heater vented to the outside? (It should not be in your bathroom or bedroom.)
- Are there any electrical outlets, switches or fixtures that do not operate properly?
- Do any pipes leak?

General

- Are there times when the dwelling is not maintained at a minimum temperature to ensure health and safety?
- Does your heating system work when the outside temperature is below 60 degrees F.?
- Are there insects or rodents in the dwelling?
- Is there poisonous paint or materials used on the walls and ceilings?
- Is there debris and garbage around to breed pests?
- Does the basement flood?
- Do the walls or ceiling leak?

Tenant Related Problems

Is there lack of sanitary upkeep, garbage and rubbish? Some people feel that cleanliness is just a matter of lifestyle. That is true within limits. You may have the right to live in a mess, but if it causes rodents and pests that hurt other people in the building, then you are infringing on others' rights.

This is a general overview of most housing codes. If you suspect a violation, contact the housing officials. It is also wise to find out if the building you are considering renting or the one you are presently living in is properly registered and certified by the city as a safe rental unit. You can get this information from the Code Enforcement Department.