Off-Campus Housing 101

Help ensure a student’s first time living outside the dorms is safe

By Thomas J. Bukowski

College students looking to move off campus need to consider the safety of a rental unit before signing a lease.

If they don't, they could find themselves with a family of raccoons as roommates.

“A student tenant said that in the middle of the night, she heard a crashing sound and later found out that a raccoon had fallen down into the wall,” said Anders Zanichkowsky, program director for the Madison, WI-based Tenant Resource Center, which offers housing resources and advice to college students.

It was an “awful” scenario, Zanichkowsky said, but if the tenant had looked up the rental unit’s building code violations before moving in, she would’ve found a history of problems. She also could have discovered something was wrong if she had toured the attic area before signing a lease, he said.

Researching and visiting a potential apartment or house ahead of time is important when making smart decisions regarding off-campus housing safety.

Besides critters in the attic, what should students and parents check for?

Fire and structural safety

According to the U.S. Fire Administration, 70 fires in off-campus housing were recorded between January 2000 and June 2013, resulting in 101 deaths.

Students who are searching for housing frequently neglect to check for the presence of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in a rental unit, said Peter S. Gemmellaro, manager of Off-Campus and Customer Services at the University of Pennsylvania. The university advises students to look for the following in any rental unit they’re considering:

- Check to ensure the building or apartment has a sufficient number of certified and functioning fire extinguishers, smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors based on

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fire code requirements for that type of unit.
• Ensure all fire exits, such as windows, are marked and are protected to prevent unauthorized access from the outside.
• For apartments with fire alarm systems and emergency/standby electrical systems, ask the landlord for a copy of the equipment’s latest certification to ensure it’s up to date.

Some towns or cities have building inspectors who keep written public records every time they inspect a building, Zanichkowsky said. He recommends students check these records to determine whether any uncorrected violations exist in the prospective rental unit. Depending on the state and city, landlords are responsible for disclosing information about the conditions of the rental space, he added. This could include safety hazards such as the presence of lead or information on the cooling and heating systems.

Fire codes and standards
For more information about state and local fire codes, including requirements for extinguishers and smoke detectors, contact your regional National Fire Protection Association office at www.nfpa.org/about-nfpa/offices/regional-offices.

Security considerations
Campus neighborhoods are unique when it comes to crime, said Sean M. McLaughlin, director of Off-Campus and Commuter Student Engagement at Ohio State University. They tend to feature a young, inexperienced population with items that are attractive to thieves, including laptops and large electronics.

“Many college students grow up in areas where crime is not a factor,” McLaughlin said. “This might not be the same case in your student neighborhood. Exercise some caution, and be smart.”

To help ensure a rental unit is secure from theft and intruders, Rutgers University suggests checking the following:

• Entry and exit doors should be equipped with dead bolts or shielded doorknob locks, with locks and strike plates mounted securely.
• First-floor windows, fire escape windows or other windows accessible from the outside should have locks.
• The building entrance and walkways should be adequately lit, and tenants should be able to see people approaching the front door through a peephole or window.

If the rental unit doesn’t have an alarm system, students should consider purchasing battery-powered, temporary door or window alarms (while being careful to avoid violating security deposit rules when installing them), McLaughlin said. Although he doesn’t consider them “critical” safety elements, concerned students or parents may.

Preventing unauthorized access from outside intruders is only one security concern – individual rooms in shared houses should have their own locks, too, McLaughlin advised.

Another idea to consider is speaking with local law enforcement to find out additional information about a potential rental location or neighborhood, Zanichkowsky said.

Finding the right place
Gemmellaro advises parents to join students on housing searches. “It’s always helpful to have another set of eyes when viewing an apartment,” he said. “We encourage students and their families to visit neighborhoods, ideally at different times of the day. ... You can tell a lot by the condition of buildings in a neighborhood.”

Students should talk to the current tenants of a prospective rental for additional insight, Zanichkowsky recommended. They’ll be able to share information about a living space’s conditions year-round. For instance, a porch that looks great during the summer may not in winter when it is covered in ice.

This also is a good opportunity to ask about the area, he said – ask if the building or neighborhood have any safety, noise or security problems, and whether police respond quickly to calls.

McLaughlin warned against thinking that the price of a rental unit equates to its safety, noting that variables such as proximity to campus, condition, demand for housing in the area and amenities all factor into the cost of rent.

“Expensive rental units could well have great appliances, new carpet and Wi-Fi, but could lack safety features such as modernized windows, properly locking doors and alarms,” he said.

At the end of the day, instincts are important, too: “If your gut is saying ‘no’... Don’t sign the lease,” McLaughlin said. FS&H

Safety checklist for off-campus housing
Visit http://bit.ly/13dRzn2 to download the University of Pennsylvania’s off-campus housing safety checklist, which includes basic security and fire safety elements to look for at a potential rental unit.

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