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THE SOUND ENVIRONMENT

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Rent problems can be avoided

By David Wood

Perhaps a third of the complaints students bring to the ASUN legal services office are rent-related, said Director Shelley Stall. The problems might be largely averted, she said, if preventive steps are taken.

Stall had these suggestions for renters;

A damage deposit is most likely to make a landlord seem like a predator to a renter ignorant of the law mandated by Nebraska's Landlord and Tenant Act of 1976, Stall said.

The most a landlord may require for a damage deposit is one month's rent—but Stall said, the amount should be negotiated as low as possible. The renter should keep a receipt or cancelled check in case either party forgets the amount.

At the termination of tenancy money from the deposit may be withheld, either for repairs or damages beyond "ordinary wear and tear," or for the remainder of the rent, Stall said.

To protect against unnecessary damage charges, renters should itemize any damages they find when they move in. The landlord should participate in the inspection, and both parties should sign the list.

Written documents valuable

The smart renter always "gets it in writing," she said. If the landlord promises to paint the kitchen before the renter moves in, it should be written into the lease as a clause, Stall said.

If the landlord assesses for damages the renter should ask for an itemization and keep a copy of the request. Written documents can be invaluable, should a conflict ever end in small claims court.

In some cases the renters should sign agreements with roommates, itemizing responsibility to the lease, she said.

Breaking a lease isn't as awful as some students might fear, Stall said. The remaining months on a lease cannot be charged for if the property is rented to someone else because landlords can't collect twice.

After written notice to the landlord, the renter can only be responsible for the next month's entire rent and possibly advertising costs beyond "the reasonable effort" of the landlord to rent the property again.

Safety important

Lincoln Minimum Housing Code requires all tenantable properties to be safe and sound, have proper utility hookups, garbage cans, and screens, to be water-tight and pestfree.

A well-informed renter would not walk past a red tag, said Harold Hansel, a consultant at the Housing Codes Office. GO ERSIT O 1981 LILENE

Dwellings that fail to meet the code are posted with red tags stating that they are unfit for occupancy, Hansel said.

Hansel is now, from a former staff of three, the only general inspector for the city.

"There isn't the manpower," he said, yet he'd like to see the day when every property is certified fit for occupancy before it is opened to rent. As it is, properties are assumed to be fit until proven otherwise, and inspections are initiated only after complaints are filed. Cockroaches, Hansel said, inspire most complaints.

Across the city, neighborhood associations have been formed to give renters extra authority in maintaining their communities, but these, Hansel said, don't help. Instead, they complicate matters by confusing the office's priorities with complaints which are often less important, he said.

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