

## **Being A Smart Tenant – Before You Rent!**

### **FAIR HOUSING HIGHLIGHT #41**

*When you begin an apartment search, it is important to remember that not all landlords are created equal! Be a smart renter and follow the advice below!*

#### **I found a place that I can afford and met with the landlord. He promised to paint the walls and fix some appliances before I move in. How can I make sure he keeps his word?**

The best way to determine a landlord's worth is to learn about his reputation ahead of time! Talk to other tenants and ask them questions about the landlord's trustworthiness and responsiveness to problems. Remember, smart landlords will check out potential tenants before they rent to them, so smart tenants should do the same. If the landlord promises to fix things before you move in, ask that the items be put in writing with a date as to when they will be addressed.

#### **I have a walk-through at an apartment I'm interested in. What types of questions should I ask the landlord when I view the unit?**

Go with a written list of questions and make notes of the answers. Make sure to inquire about all the financial obligations associated with renting the unit, including rent, security deposits, application fees, credit check fees, late payment fees, pet fees and cleaning fees. Ask specifically about the average cost of utilities if they are not included in your rent, especially if they are "pro-rated" by the landlord. Also, you should verify any timing issues in the lease, like the day rent is due, length of grace periods for late payment, and notice requirements for when you decide to move out. In addition to asking about lease items, you **MUST** inspect the general condition of the unit for damage. Examine the walls, floors, rugs, kitchen and bathroom appliances, doors and locks, heat and air conditioning. Make sure that everything is in good working condition before renting the unit! Most importantly, if there is anything you see which might be dangerous, like electrical wires or rickety steps, bring it immediately to the attention of the landlord. *Under the Warranty of Habitability, a landlord may not legally rent a property that is not habitable or has serious code violations. This cannot be waived in the lease.* These types of violations should be fixed before you move in. For less important concerns, make sure to put in writing that the landlord has agreed to fix them and when the repairs will be completed.

#### **I want to rent an apartment but the landlord says he doesn't give out written leases. Is that ok?**

While both oral and written leases are legal in Pennsylvania, smart tenants demand a written lease to protect their rights. After receiving the lease, make sure to read and understand it thoroughly and keep a copy. If you have trouble understanding your lease, legal aid and community housing organizations can be of assistance. A landlord who won't let you read a lease, won't let you take it to someone for assistance, or won't provide a copy for your records will not be someone you want to be in business with!

#### **Last time I rented an apartment I never got my security deposit back. What can I do to prevent that from happening again?**

Remember to take pictures of your unit at the time you move in and when you move out. These can be used to dispute any claims of damage beyond wear and tear that a landlord makes. Also, be sure to leave a forwarding address with your landlord so they can send you the money!

#### **My landlord comes by once a month and collects rent from me in person. He only accepts cash. Should I get a receipt?**

YES – documentation is everything!!! Get receipts for all payments. If your landlord won't give you a receipt, make one yourself and have him sign it.

#### **I have poor credit, but the landlord at a place I'm interested in said it's okay as long as I pay 6 months up front. Is that a good idea?**

Sometimes this can be a tenant's only option, but paying that much rent up front could put you at a disadvantage if you need to negotiate with your landlord for repairs. Look for alternative ways to show you can pay your rent, like getting a co-signer or showing a record of steady income.

**Questions? Call the Fair Housing Rights Center in Southeastern Pennsylvania at 215 576-7711 or visit us online at [www.fairhousingrights.org](http://www.fairhousingrights.org).**