

10-27-17 Housing Solutions: Looking for Suggestions

We so desperately need affordable housing and it is my job to make sure the housing is safe, meeting the standards, (which are minimum) of the State Housing Code 105 CMR 410.000.

Barely affordable housing not meeting the code is a bad combination. And there is even pricey housing out there, that appeared worth it at first glance, until the rats were discovered and the heat stopped working and the window fell in and the skylights leaked. (True story.)

Housing inspections are one of the most time-consuming aspects of my job. A complaint arrives at the office, usually from a tenant, but not always. I respond to the complaint, conduct an inspection and then write the Order to Correct. I aim for a smooth ride and cooperation. When it is a bumpy road or a silent one of procrastination or outright refusal, it becomes time-consuming. I have decisions to make. Should I go to court to file a complaint? Should I issue a fine?

If everyone cooperated, we could get this done! When people have a cooperative spirit, it goes a long way toward solutions.

Of course, life doesn't always work that way. Even though I know that, I would I would prefer to prevent problems, rather than respond to them. With prevention in mind, I would love to see an inspection required upon change in occupancy. It would be a win-win!

The tenant would be reassured of safe housing. The owner would have the inspection report and pictures to show the apartment or house met the code before it was rented. The case load in housing court could be reduced because the evidence of safe housing at the start would be there.

I tried to get this idea off the ground a few years ago. I figured I needed an additional labor force though, and wanted to achieve that without costing the town. I thought a user fee to pay a consultant would work. I called some home inspectors but that did not pan out. They wanted about five hundred dollars and a fee to administer.

I would be willing to train others, such as realtors or contractors with liability insurance, to use the housing code and the checklist form we use. I think a fee of one hundred dollars would work.

Another option for a smallish town like Halifax and a small town like Plympton would be to advertise the offer for the health agent to conduct a voluntary inspection, for an affordable fee, to help everything go well with the next rental.

Again, it would be a win-win situation. This would be a way to ease into the concept. Anyone using it would benefit. Others would prefer to hide and not take advantage of the offer.

Some owners avoid this offer because their apartment is not legal in zoning terms. A health agent is taught to inspect according to the code regardless of its “legality”. That is for others to decide. Our job is to make sure it is safe.

I have learned that some people hide because they are hiding income and do not want to reduce the profits with repair expenses. That group even includes attorneys. Sometimes an attorney acts as a trustee for an estate. Money is handled and there is not necessarily the involvement you would assume with the “state of the Estate”. But the rent is collected!

It takes all kinds, doesn't it? And we meet all kinds. I think the kind of people who want to do the right thing and wish to have as few problems as possible, might be interested in having a voluntary inspection. The others, who do not take the offer, I will deal with as problems arise, however they are discovered; by a phone call from tenant or owner, or by the Fire or Police Department informing me of poor living conditions.

People hide out of shame and or fear also. Renters are sometimes at the mercy of their circumstances. They fear eviction. They can't afford higher rent and are willing to put up with all kinds of conditions, if they can stay put.

Years ago, I met a woman who told me about the beautiful nautical window in the house she rented. Her face glowed as she talked. I had no idea where she lived. I just smiled and nodded my head in appreciation for her admiration and gratitude for her beautiful rental. Some months later I was asked to go there as the result of the concern of an EMT. As I talked with the woman, I discovered she did not have a stove! She did have a little electric portable oven on a coffee table. And there was no sink! She washed dishes in the bathtub. This time, the look in her eyes and the sound of her voice said, “Really, I don't mind. This is good enough. I am desperate and need this place.” This single woman had children there.

While I was considering what to do about the stove, I realized where the real stove used to be, there was a pipe sticking up into the air, from the floor. It looked like a pipe for gas stove. I needed to get a plumber there to cap it off and make it safe. As I was leaving, I saw the porthole window she so admired. She had focused on this one bit of beauty and overlooked everything else in her desperate need for housing for herself and her children.

I think offering a voluntary inspection is a good start. Thanks for listening.

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