

# Missouri Legal Services

Legal aid programs providing free legal help to the low-income and disadvantaged in Missouri



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## Tips Before You Rent

Finding a safe and affordable place to rent takes time. Below are some important factors to consider:

### PLANNING AHEAD

- What is your budget? How much can you afford to pay for rent and utilities each month?
- Check your credit report for errors and request corrections if you find any mistakes.
- Be careful about putting money down to "hold the property." If you decide later not to rent it, the landlord may refuse to return your money. You can sue the landlord in Small Claims Court, but this will take time.
- If you put money down, ask for a written receipt which contains the landlord's name, business address and phone number.

### THE PROPERTY

- Ask other tenants who rent from the landlord whether they are happy with the building and the property they rent.
- Check the neighborhood during the day and at night. Will you feel safe there?
- Check the energy and utility costs for the property for the last 12 months by calling the utility provider.
- Find out whether the city or county requires the landlord or tenant to obtain a building inspection and/or occupancy permit before the landlord rents the property to a tenant by calling the local city hall or building inspection division. Check the current building inspection and/or occupancy permit status of the unit you are thinking about renting.
- Check to see if the unit has code violations and/or is condemned by calling the local city hall building inspection division.
- If the city or county has set a maximum occupancy limit for residential properties in the area where you want to rent, check the approved occupancy load for the property.
- Ask to see the exact unit you will be renting, not just a model unit, before you agree to rent.

### THE LANDLORD

- The landlord should provide you with a business address and phone number where he/she

can be reached. Be wary of landlords who refuse to provide this information.

- Ask to review a blank lease so that you can determine whether the landlord's standard rental lease terms are a good fit for you.

## THE TOUR

- Check the apartment carefully and ask questions!
- **REPAIRS:** What repairs or changes to the unit will be made before you move in (e.g., will the unit be freshly painted or will the carpets be replaced or cleaned)?
- **SMOKE DETECTORS:** Make sure all detectors work.
- **INFESTATION:** Look for signs of bugs, mice or other pests.
- **ELECTRIC:** Test all lights, fans or other electric fixtures.
- **APPLIANCES:** Make sure all appliances (stove, refrigerator, microwave) are working correctly.
- **UTILITIES:** Make sure all utilities (electric, gas, water) are working correctly.
- **TOILETS:** Flush the toilets.
- **SINKS AND TUBS:** Make sure the sinks and tubs drain properly.
- **HEATING AND COOLING:** Test the furnace and air conditioner.
- **THERMOSTAT:** Where is the thermostat and who controls it?
- **ELECTRIC BOX:** Where is the electric box and who has access to it?
- **WATER HEATER:** Where is the water heater and who has access to it?
- **UTILITY METERS:** For each utility you must pay, does the property have its own meter or is the meter shared between more than one tenant?
- **WINDOWS:** Make sure all windows and doors open, work and lock properly.
- **WINDOW SCREENS:** Make sure all windows have screens and the screens have no holes.
- **WINDOW COVERINGS:** Will window coverings be provided and will they be new?
- **WATER LEAKS:** Check the bathroom and kitchen for water leaks. Check walls and ceilings for water stains or signs of leaks.
- **MOLD:** Look for mold growth.
- **PARKING:** What parking options are available and where will your guests will park when they visit you.
- **MAILBOX:** Check the mailbox and make sure it is secure and in good condition.
- **SECURITY:** Are there any security services offered at the property?
- **LEAD:** Are there lead hazards? The landlord must warn you of all know lead hazards in the property.

## THE LEASE

- Read the lease carefully before you sign it.
- Read the lease carefully before you pay a security deposit.
- Ask questions if you don't understand a section of the lease.
- How long will the lease last?
- How much is the security deposit?
- How much is the rent and when is it due?
- If the rent is late, what happens?

- Who pays for each utility (electric, gas, water, sewer, trash)?
- If the tenant is responsible for a utility, how, when, and to whom will payment be made?
- Is garage space or assigned parking included in the rent?
- Review lease sections that allow the landlord to enter the property to make repairs or inspect the unit. How much notice must be given?
- If you may need to move before the end of the lease, request a provision in the lease which lets you get out of the lease early (early termination clause).
- What changes can tenants make to the apartment and when do tenants need permission? Always get the permission in writing for your protection. This would be a good time to find out if you can put nails in the walls to hang pictures, etc.
- What is the procedure for requesting repairs? Ask if there are certain hours to call and this would be a good time to find out what sort of maintenance staff the landlord has on hand.
- When I move out, what things can be deducted from my deposit? Find out exactly what things can be deducted from your security deposit so that there are no surprises at the end. Ask the landlord if it keeps a list of these items and request a copy.
- If you agree to changes or make additional agreements, get those changes or agreements in writing to avoid disputes or misunderstandings. Don't rely on oral promises by the landlord.

## **MOVING IN**

- Participate in a walk-thru inspection with the landlord right before you move in.
- Make a list of any problems you find with the property (including problems with the floors, windows, doors, walls, or appliances). Ask the landlord to sign your list.
- If repairs are needed, get it in writing. Don't count on your landlord just saying that he/she will make repairs. If the property needs repairs ask the landlord to sign an agreement that he/she will make the repairs. If the landlord agrees orally, confirm the agreement in writing.
- Take photos of the property before you move in and keep the photos in a safe place.
- Your landlord's insurance probably does not protect you from damage, theft or loss to your furniture or other property. Consider buying renters insurance if you want this protection.
- Keep records in a safe place:
  1. Landlord's address and phone number,
  2. The lease,
  3. Security deposit receipt,
  4. Repair requests,
  5. Rent receipts (or cancelled checks), and
  6. All other papers about your tenancy.

Prepared by Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, Inc. (LSEM). LSEM provides this educational information as a public service. It is not legal advice. Sometimes the laws change. Always consult a lawyer, if you can, before taking legal action. The mission of LSEM is to provide high-quality civil legal assistance and equal access to justice for low-income people in Eastern Missouri.

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