

# Housing Selection 101

In this blog post, we focus on the housing selection process for newcomers, from walk-through to move-in.

## THE WALK-THROUGH CHECKLIST

After identifying appropriate housing, the newcomer family and their case manager should visit the property to be sure it meets housing safety and functionality standards. Arrive at the housing site with either a smartphone or a camera and notepad to document any preexisting damage to the unit, and download this [housing walk-through checklist](#) to be sure nothing is forgotten.

### What to do if the housing does NOT meet standards?

The housing market is competitive. Renters are bound by location, cost, and the size of a unit. Compromise is inevitable, but safety and cleanliness are non-negotiable. Newcomers and their representatives must use their best judgement when deciding if a residence is appropriate. The walk-through is your opportunity to assess this and to document problems that exist in the unit before signing a lease. Discuss any issues with the landlord to determine if the problems can be addressed prior to move-in.

## EXECUTING THE LEASE AGREEMENT

After completing the walk-through and approving the unit's safety and cleanliness, prospective tenants and landlords execute the lease, a process that has three steps:

- The landlord creates the lease and sends it to the prospective tenant.
- The prospective tenant reviews the lease, makes any necessary adjustments, provides their signature, and then sends the lease back to the landlord.
- The landlord conducts a final review and provides their signature.

The lease sets the tone for the tenant's relationship with their landlord and the unit in which they'll reside. It determines the protocol for the entire term of the lease (typically one year).

**Therefore, it is essential to review carefully before signing.**

## REVIEWING THE LEASE

Prospective tenants, including newcomers, have the right to review — and counter — any stipulations in the lease. As you're reviewing the lease, pay close attention to the following:

- **Terms of the Lease:** Be sure that the lease term (six months, one year, or month-to-month) reflects the newcomers' needs and is indicated on the lease itself. Also take note of the lease's renewal policy. Further, if the move-in date is not on the first of the month, check to see if the rent will be pro-rated, which means tenants pay only for the days that they'll be living in the unit, not the whole month.
- **Occupants:** The landlord must confirm and agree to the number of people who will be occupying the unit. Ideally, all occupants' names should be listed, and all adults on the lease should sign.
- **Utilities:** Discuss with the landlord which utilities are included in the rent amount, if any, and make sure the lease clearly identifies them. Utility companies servicing the building will need to be notified of the tenants' move-in date to ensure billing begins on the correct date.
- **Breaking the Lease:** When moving into a new place, tenants rarely expect they'll have to break their lease early. But vacating prior to the end of a lease is actually not uncommon. Before newcomers sign, make sure they understand the penalties and consequences for breaking the lease. Also look for any move-out notice requirements. (For example, many landlords now require 30 or 60 days' notice before vacating.) Breaking a lease can have serious consequences on newcomers' finance, credit, and rental history, potentially impacting their future housing applications. This decision should not be taken lightly.
- **Guests:** Certain leases have specific rules surrounding guests; some leases prohibit overnight stays for more than a set amount of time.
- **How and When to Pay Rent:** Ensure that clients are fully aware of how and when to pay rent, as well as the consequences of late payments. Each landlord or property management company may collect rent differently. Ways to pay rent can include using an online portal that draws from the tenant's bank account, wiring money, mailing a check, or dropping off payment in person. Confirm with the landlord which payment method they prefer. If the landlord uses an online portal and the clients are unfamiliar with paying rent online, walk them through how to use the portal. If they are otherwise uncomfortable with that, speak with the landlord to see if they would

be open to receiving rent payments via check. Some states prohibit landlords from denying different forms of payment, so be sure to check your state's laws.

- **Renters Insurance:** Whether renters insurance is required by the terms of the lease, we recommend that all newcomers acquire it prior to moving in. Service providers can guide clients through the process of identifying renters insurance that is affordable and suits their needs.
- **Security Deposit:** Typically, security deposits are in the amount of one to two months of rent and serve to cover the cost of repairing potential damage to the unit (outside of normal wear and tear) that the tenant is responsible for upon move-out. If the unit is left in the same general condition as when the tenant moved in, the security deposit will be returned within 30 days of the move-out date.
- **Move-in Fees:** Some leases include move-in fees. Though these expenses (first and last months' rent, administrative fees, elevator rental fees, pet deposits, etc.) are typically non-negotiable, take note of them so the newcomer family is prepared to pay them on move-in day.
- **Personalization:** To avoid damage, property owners typically have strict rules surrounding tenant personalization (painting walls, hanging photos, installing bookshelves, etc.). Pay close attention to rules surrounding changes to the unit during occupancy.
- **Contact Information for the Landlord and Property Management Team:** Make sure to have the landlord or property manager's contact information and the best ways to reach them in emergency situations.
- **Maintenance Requests:** Take note of the lease's language on maintenance requests. How are both general and emergency repairs handled? In what timeframe? Confirm this process with the landlord prior to lease execution.
- **Any Additional Lease Details:** Service fees, returned check fees, parking, pet restrictions, specific trash and recycling guidelines, quiet hours, how to add or remove an occupant from the lease, use of common areas, restrictions on smoking or burning incense, etc. are all important details to cover with clients to ensure that no rules are accidentally broken.



## MOVE-IN GUIDELINES

After the newcomer has signed the lease, sponsors and case managers should begin prepping their clients for move-in. Newcomers typically don't arrive in the U.S. with many belongings, so it's the welcomers' job to ensure that the family has all they need to get started.

There are many aspects to preparing a home for newcomers. Most often, there are requirements that certain pieces of furniture and basic supplies be in the home prior to move-in. This Home Supply Checklist is a great resource to help you ensure that clients, and the home, are ready for move-in. While created for clients in the Reception and Placement (R&P) Program, this checklist is relevant even for clients who are not currently enrolled in R&P.

As you are orienting the newcomer family to their home, be sure to provide them with proper housing upkeep tutorials and any appliance guides, as some people may be unfamiliar with American appliances and general maintenance standards.

The following additional resources—available in a variety of languages—offer more details on apartment maintenance, safety, security, mail and notices, energy conservation, and what it means to be a good neighbor in the United States:

- [Welcome to Your New Home](#)
- [Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange: Overview of Housing](#)
- [Settle In: Housing](#)