

Finding a Place to Live

One of the most stressful things about moving to a new city – not to mention a new country – is finding a place to live.

What type of Housing do I need?

There is a wide range of housing available in the Washington, D.C. area. Before spending a lot of time looking for a place to live, it is important to consider what factors are important to you.

- Do you care about how close you live to the University or to your work site?
- Do you have family members who will join you in the U.S.?
- Are you looking for an apartment by yourself?
- Are you willing to share an apartment with other people?
- Are you willing to rent a room in someone's house?
- How much can you spend on housing each month?
- How much can I afford to spend on transportation each month?

All of these factors will affect your search for a place to live. In general:

- Housing inside Washington, D.C. is more expensive than housing in the surrounding areas. Unfortunately, this could mean that you would need to spend more time and money commuting.
- The more dependents you have that will join you in the U.S., the larger your apartment or house must be. In general, you should plan on having no more than two children per bedroom.
- Renting an apartment by yourself will cost you more than splitting the rent with other people.
- Often, the least expensive option is to rent a room in someone else's house.

Where to find vacancies

There are many ways to locate places to live. The following are some useful websites and resources in finding an apartment:

www.washingtonpost.com
www.washingtoncitypaper.com
www.craigslist.com
www.theapartmentconnection.com
www.rentnet.com

Using an apartment locator service

If you have the time, you might consider using an apartment locator service. This service is free for you and is paid for by the management of the housing complexes. The locator will talk to you about housing preferences, price ranges, etc. and will look for available apartments and housing that meet your criteria. Some will even take you to see the properties and help you negotiate your lease.

Washington DC Apartment Resources

CUA Off Campus Housing Resources - <https://offcampushousing.cua.edu/>
Centro Maria - centromaria.vzwebsites.com
Washington Post - www.washingtonpost.com/rentals
Apartment Showcase - www.apartmentshowcase.com
For Rent - www.forrent.com
DC Urban Turf - www.dc.urbanturf.com
Zillow - www.zillow.com/washington-dc/rent
Urban Igloo - www.urbanigloo.com
4 Walls in DC - www.4wallsindc.com
DC Housing Search - www.dchousingsearch.org
Trulia DC Rentals - www.trulia.com

Roommate Match Services

Roommate Express - www.Roommateexpress.com
Easy Roommate - www.easyroommate.com
Roommates.com - www.roommates.com
Sublet.com - www.Sublet.com
Metro Roommates - www.MetroRoommates.com

Finding Out about Neighborhoods

If you were looking for a place to live in your hometown, you would already know a little about the various neighborhoods. When you move to a new city, you do not have that knowledge. You must figure out which area you wish to live. To find out about the Washington, D.C. area, check out the following website:

<http://epodunk.com>

This website provides useful links to sources of information in the D.C. area, including area schools, neighborhood and community information, crime statistics, etc.

Factors to Consider when Choosing a Place to Live

As you look for a place to live and you compare one place to another, there are many factors to consider.

1. Neighborhood Factors

- How safe is the neighborhood?
- How good are the schools?

2. Apartment Factors

- Which utilities (i.e., gas, water, electricity) are included in the rent, if any?
- If they are not included, approximately how much are the utilities per month?
- Does the place have a laundry room or do you need to go someplace else to wash your clothes? If so, how far away is this?
- How close is this to public transportation (Metro, bus, etc.)?
- Is the apartment furnished? Generally, you will need to provide furniture (beds, tables, chairs, dressers, etc.) Bedrooms usually have closets where you can hang clothes and kitchens have refrigerators, cabinets ovens, stoves and sometimes microwave ovens)
- Where is the nearest grocery store, shopping area, etc.?
- How much money do you need to provide before you can move in? It is very common to be asked to pay a security deposit and one or two months rent in advance.
- Do the buildings look well maintained? How about the grounds? Laundry facilities?

Tips For Looking at the Apartment

Before you sign the lease, it is important to walk through the empty apartment. Take with you a pen and some paper. In each room, look for cracks, leaks, stains, squeaking doors, and other defects. It's best to do this during the day to see how much natural light the apartment gets.

- Do the locks work?
- Does your door have a peep hole through which to look at visitors before opening the door?
- Are the mailboxes in good condition?
- Run the water – does it run red (i.e. the pipes are rusty) or clear.

- Is the toilet seat firmly attached to the toilet?
- Are the tiles in the bathroom or kitchen cracked?
- Do the lights work?
- Can you test the air conditioning/heat?
- What does the kitchen look like?
- Is the refrigerator clean?
- Do the windows open? Can you lock them?
- How clean is the building over all?
- How well maintained are the grounds?
- If the building/complex has laundry facilities, how clean are they? Are the machines in good shape or are they broken down? How safe is the path to the laundry room if you have to do laundry at night? Is it open?
- If you have or plan to have a car, is parking included in the rent or is it extra? How much? How many spaces are included?

Now that you've looked at the inside consider the apartment from the standpoint of security.

- Is the apartment on a first floor? How easy would it be for someone to break in? Are there bushes or plants in front of your windows that provide you with privacy but might also give a potential criminal cover to break into your home? If there are bars on the windows for security, can you open them in the event of an emergency such as a fire?
- If you are on a higher floor, do you have a balcony or patio? How easy would it be for someone to climb up? How is the balcony supported? Does it look safe?
- Does your complex have security guard? Controlled access?
- How sturdy are the front doors both to the building and to the apartment?
- How well lit is the building and the path to the building?

Now consider how you would escape the building if there were a fire.

You should, if time permits, visit the property more than once. You don't need to go inside the apartment each time, but you should look at the neighborhood and the building during the day and at night. Also, seeing it on both a week day and on a weekend is a good idea, too, particularly if you care about noise levels. Do children playing outside create a lot of noise on weekends? Do you hear a lot of noise from the street on Friday and Saturday nights? Does this matter to you?

Carefully make a list of all the things that need to be fixed with the apartment. If you want this apartment, give the list to your landlord and have them sign or initial it and attach it to your lease.

The Background or Credit Check

Before approving your application for the apartment, many landlords will run a credit or background check on you. They are trying to establish your reliability and assess what sort of risk they are taking in renting to you. They may ask you to provide a Social Security Number in order to run the credit check. If you have a social security number, you can provide it. If you have just arrived in the U.S. you probably do not have one. This should not be a deterrent. A credit check can still be run on you using your name and date of birth. If you encounter difficulties with the leasing office, contact International Student and Scholar Services.

The Security Deposit

The security deposit is a sum of money, usually equal to one months rent that a landlord asks for before you move in. The purpose of this money is to cover any costs the landlord may have when you leave. These costs may come in the form of:

1. damages you may do to the apartment while you are there or
2. any unpaid rent that you owe at the time of your departure.

If you maintain the apartment properly, notify the landlord of problems, and give the landlord at least 30 days notice before you move out, you should get all or most of the security deposit back.

The Lease

Read the lease or rental agreement carefully. This legal document is a contract between you and the landlord. It should very clearly tell you the terms of the rental agreement. Be sure that you understand the following:

- what is the address covered – the lease should provide the official street address and apartment number
- When rent is due and any grace period for paying (for example, in some places rent is due on the first of the month, but you are not penalized and charged late fees until after the 5th of the month. These grace periods vary and some places do not offer grace periods.)
- How much rent must be paid each month?
- Where is it to be paid?
- What is the penalty for late payment?

- When can the landlord increase the rent?
- How much notice must you give before moving out?
- How much notice must the landlord give before asking you to leave?
- How much is your security deposit?
- What is the penalty for breaking the lease (in case something happens and you need to leave before your lease is up)?
- How long is the lease (a year? Six months?) In many places, the initial lease is for a year and then converts to a month-by-month lease.
- What needs to be done to extend a lease?
- If you will be gone for a significant period of time, can you sublet your apartment?

If it is not in the lease, you should discuss with your landlord – BEFORE signing the lease – what rights the landlord has to enter your apartment when you are not there (for example, to do repairs or to spray against bugs.)

Once you've signed the lease and before you move your belongings in, do another tour of the apartment. If you prepared a list of things that were wrong with the apartment on your previous tour, use it to see if any repairs were not made. Be fore to let your landlord know, in writing, of anything that is wrong with the apartment. If you do not bring it to their attention in the beginning, you may have to pay for the repairs yourself.

Renter's Insurance

Once you have a place to live and begin to furnish the place, it is highly advisable to obtain insurance for your belongings. If there is a fire or some other catastrophe in your building and your unit and all your belongings are destroyed, you will need to replace them somehow. Your landlord's insurance policy covers the cost of replacing the building only and does not cover your property.