

Three Things to do When A Tenant Moves In

By Robert L. Cain

1. Walk through the unit and show them where everything is.

If you think this step isn't important, just wait until you have a water leak, your tenant calls you and hasn't turned off the water because he doesn't know where the shutoff is. There's more to it than that, though.

You are showing your new tenant his or her new home. And not just the interior. Show where the garbage goes, where the mail boxes are, where the pool is; you know, all the stuff somebody needs to know to live in the unit.

If you really want to make a terrific impression, put together a move-in packet. What should be in it? Mindy Williams, editor of *Rent and Retain Magazine*, suggests the following:

- A welcome letter
- Utilities Hookup phone numbers
- Fax maintenance form
- A "How to Work Your Apartment" form. This explains how to set the microwave, how to use the dishwasher, what not to put in the garbage disposal, how to test the smoke detector, how to change the air filter, where the electric shut off is, where the main water shut off is and phone numbers of how to reach you and/or the manager or management company.
- Renter's insurance information
- Area maps
- Fire safety information (get it from the fire department)
- Bus schedules
- Takeout and delivery menus from local restaurants
- Applications for: Video stores, health club, bank, library card, water delivery companies; a post office change of address form, etc. By including the applications you are saving your new resident time. You also are giving them a perception of convenience. They can just walk into the video store, hand in the application, and by the time they select a movie, their card will be ready. It doesn't matter if they use the forms: the fact that you thought enough to offer the convenience makes a great impression.
- Coupons from local businesses

You may be able to think of even more things to include in the welcome packet. Just don't try to anticipate what individual tenants will want: it's too difficult and time-consuming, and could be construed as discriminatory. It doesn't matter so much what is in the welcome packet, just that you thought enough of them to provide it.

2. Do a "Condition of Premises Report" and collect a security deposit.

Washington law requires that if you collect a security deposit you have a written "Condition of Premises" report signed by the tenant that includes the name of the financial institution where their deposit will be kept. The walk through of the property to fill out the report is important. Even if your state law has no such requirement, it is a condition of premises report is important anyway. **(Editor's Note: AOA Form 131, Exit/Enter Checklist)**

Many landlords simply hand the report to their new tenant and say "fill it out and send it back to me." Yes, that works most of the time. In fact many landlords go their entire careers and never have a problem doing it that way. But think of this scenario:

Tenant rents from you and pays security deposit. You hand tenant Condition of Premises report and tell him to fill it out and send it back to you. He does, and even signs and dates it. You just glance at it because you're a little distracted right then and file it away.

Tenant moves out. You go over to the property and start marking off all kinds of damage to deduct from the security deposit. You send him the report in a couple of weeks accounting for your keeping the entire deposit. He sues. In the suit he says "the property was that way when I moved in and the Condition of Premises report even says so." You drag it out and discover that your tenant had shown extensive damage in several rooms---just the ones where the damage was. **(Editor's Note: CA law requires an accounting and/or refund be sent within 21 days of move-out.)**

The judge requires that you refund the entire deposit plus a penalty for “capriciously and maliciously” withholding the deposit. All because you not only did not walk through the property with the tenant, but didn’t really look at the report when you got it.

Going through the unit with the tenant does a couple of things, both good for you. One, it lets the tenant know that you care about the property and are willing to take the time to make sure that it meets his needs and expectations. That’s just good business. Second, it lets him know that you know what the unit looked like when he moved in. Anything that isn’t in tiptop shape will be marked as such on the report. Likewise everything else will be considered to be in excellent condition and should still be that way when the tenant moves if he expects to get his security deposit back.

3. Go over the rental agreement or lease and the house rules. Emphasize the importance of timely rent. Explain that rent is LATE on the second of the month. Strict adherence to the rental agreement, including prompt rent payment, begins the day the tenant signs the lease. Your going over the agreement with him greatly reduces the chances that you are going to hear the excuse “I didn’t know that was in the lease.” Then the fact that you impress upon your new renter how important you believe it is for the rent to come first, before any other bill, will go a long ways toward your new renter acquiring the same attitude.

Things are only important if you make them important. Make strict adherence to all agreements important to your tenants.

Do these things and you start out your relationship with your new renter on a solid footing. You’ve made a terrific first impression, you’ve established the condition of the unit without question and you’ve let him or her know that strict adherence to the rules is important to you and prompt rent payment is essential.

Good tenants like to know where they stand and like to rent from landlords who are organized. They also appreciate, as do most people, the little things that their landlord does for them. Start the tenancy out on the right foot and you’ll keep your good tenants a lot longer.

Reprinted with permission of The Northwest Landlord.