



CITY OF IOWA CITY

MEMORANDUM

To: City Council
From: Norm Cate, Senior Housing Inspector
Date: September 4, 2003
Re: Change to inspection procedures

The demand for inspection services has been increasing due to neighborhood code enforcement expectations, continuing expansion of the rental housing market and enforcement of newly adopted ordinances.

In addition, without increasing staff to meet this growing demand, the current service level will be impossible to maintain. Operational changes must be considered.

The following four operational changes would be undertaken on a trial basis. HIS will evaluate each operational change at the end of one year to determine whether or not to continue with the change.

While these changes may potentially pose some risk to tenants and the quality of the community's housing stock, we believe these changes minimize that risk with safe and well-maintained property while continuing with current inspection procedures on poorly maintained property.

1. SELF-CERTIFICATION OF OWNER-OCCUPIED UNITS WITHIN RENTAL STRUCTURES

(a) Current Practice

The practice for inspections of owner-occupied units within a structure requiring a rental permit is to enter the unit and inspect only the fire/life-safety components of the unit. Routine maintenance items within the unit are not cited.

(b) Operational Change

For owner-occupied units in multi-family buildings with rentals built after May 10th, 1989, and all owner-occupied townhouse style structures, HIS proposes to eliminate the practice of entering the unit. Owners of owner-occupied units would be required to complete a fire and life-safety inspection checklist and return the form to their property manager. Those checklists will become part of the city's rental property file.

(c) Discussion

The time spent obtaining entry and subsequent follow-up reinspections makes gaining compliance in owner-occupied units a difficult, time-consuming process. This operational change would eliminate the need for entry and follow-up inspections without notably compromising the fire and life-safety status of the structure. Multi-family buildings built after the above date were required by the Uniform Building Code to provide an increased level of fire-separation between units, thereby increasing the fire-safety of the entire structure. In townhouse style units, direct exiting to the public way is provided, thereby eliminating common area exiting concerns. HIS will conduct a full inspection of an owner-occupied unit if requested by the owner.

2. RANDOM UNIT INSPECTION

(a) Current Practice

The practice for rental licensing inspections is to inspect all units, common areas and exterior/yard areas of every structure requiring a rental permit.

(b) Operational Change

For multi-family buildings with twelve or more units, HIS proposes to randomly inspect one-half the units and will retain the discretion to inspect all the units if the inspector has reason to believe substantial problems may exist in other units. Owners/property managers would certify all units have passed an HIS inspection checklist sheet no more than a week before the scheduled licensing inspection. Those checklists will become part of the city's rental property file. All common areas, fire/life-safety systems and exteriors of structures would continue to be inspected.

(c) Discussion

This operational change would reduce the initial rental permit inspection time for the inspector and owners/managers in properties that are well maintained and exhibit a responsible "track-record". Random selection of units for inspection should help maintain owner/property manager accountability and compliance with the housing code.

3. REDUCED RENTAL INSPECTIONS ON NEW MULTI-FAMILY BUILDINGS

(a) Current Practice

The practice for new multi-family structures is to conduct the first rental licensing inspection two years after the issuance of the building's certificate of occupancy.

(b) Operational Change

For new multi-family construction, HIS proposes that at the time of the first rental licensing inspection only common areas and exteriors will be inspected. Owners/managers will certify all units have passed the HIS inspection checklist sheet. The checklists will become part of the city's rental property file. This first reduced rental licensing inspection would be a one-time occurrence only. A full inspection would be conducted at the next regularly scheduled rental licensing inspection. The inspector would retain the discretion to inspect all units if he/she has reason to believe substantial problems exist within units.

(c) Discussion

This operational change would recognize the increased level of safety inherent in new construction. In buildings requiring test and maintenance certification of sprinkler and alarm systems, those certifications will be obtained and all common area fire and life-safety items will be inspected.

4. FOCUS REINSPECTIONS ON FIRE/LIFE-SAFETY SYSTEMS AND SIGNIFICANT MAINTENANCE ITEMS.

(a) Current Practice

The practice is to return to a rental property if violations were cited during the rental licensing inspection. These reinspections are to verify that all items cited on the notice of violation have been corrected.

(b) Operational Change

HIS proposes to focus its reinspections on violations of the fire/life-safety system components of buildings and any significant maintenance items. If a fire/life-safety or significant maintenance violation exists during the initial inspection, the inspector will return to verify that those items have been repaired and are in compliance. Routine maintenance items will be cited if found in violation as usual during the initial inspection but those items will not necessarily require the inspector to make a return visit to seek compliance.

(c) Discussion

This operational change would focus our return visit time primarily to fire/life-safety items only, thereby saving inspector travelling time and expense with no compromise to the tenant's safety. Inspectors would retain the discretion to reinspect for all items noted on the notice of violation if he/she has reason to believe substantial problems exist within units. The advantage of a two-year inspection cycle allows inspectors to check for compliance on maintenance items cited during the previous inspection at the next regularly scheduled rental licensing inspection.

Due to the continued growth in the construction of new multi-family buildings, and with no end in immediate sight, these operational changes will allow us to meet our commitment to enforce the City of Iowa City's Housing Code for two years at best without additional staff. It is our belief that the current two-year inspection cycle for multi-family buildings will help us to implement these operational changes without substantial risk to tenants and our community's housing stock. Nevertheless, without additional staff at this time we will not be able to sustain the current level of response to zoning and nuisance complaint investigations, such as junk, garbage, inoperable vehicles, parking on grass, etc.

A meeting to discuss these operational changes has been scheduled for September 23rd, 2003 with the Greater Iowa City Apartment Owners Association's membership.