

Campus and Community Commission
Report to Ames City Council: Landlord/Tenant Relations
May 26, 2020

Direction from City Council:

In March of 2019, City Council directed the Campus and Community Commission to evaluate the state of landlord/tenant relations in the City of Ames. Specific requests in the charge included:

- Information on what students need to know about the rental process and tenant responsibilities
- Locations of where relevant informational resources about the rental process exist
- Discussion between student renters and landlords facilitated by the Commission
- Reporting to the City Council regarding assessment and outcome of the discussion

The aim of the Commission during this process was to devise solutions to address identified issues in these topics of interest. The steps taken and solutions presented are described below.

Steps Taken:

During the summer of 2019, the Commission heard input from Student Legal Services and the Student Government representative on City Council, Devyn Leeson. A meeting of the Commission was also held in conjunction with Ames PD Officer Kurt Kruger's landlord group. At this meeting, the Commission discussed various issues with landlords such as the lease gap, information packets, and a prospective mediation process. After the beginning of the fall semester, the Commission heard presentations from the City Inspection Division, the Iowa State Dean of Students Office, and Officer Kruger. To jointly achieve the goals of gathering information from students and facilitating a discussion between students and landlords, the Commission decided to attend the annual Student Government-organized Residency Fair. At the Residency Fair, the Commission gathered feedback from students as well as additional input from the landlords present; following this, the Commission felt that there was sufficient information to recommend various actions which would help improve the current relationship between students and landlords.

Actions Recommended:

The most impactful of the solutions considered would be implementation of a mediation process. This would address the commonly cited need expressed by both students and landlords for an informal resolution process for small grievances that spares both parties from utilizing small claims court. A possible model would be the one formerly employed at the Center for Creative Justice.

Another area that requires addressing is the general lack of both information and awareness of existing information regarding the rental process plus understanding the terms and conditions of leases. There are multiple ways this can be addressed, including informational packets handed out with leases by landlords, an annual seminar by Student Legal Services for the benefit of students, and a revamping and promotion of the RentSmart Ames website.

Since the Commission began its discussion in 2019, the University enrollment and rental housing market has significantly changed. Enrollment declines and continued development of additional rental housing have reduced occupancy, thus providing the opportunity for the marketplace to improve relationships between tenants and landlords. Although the current impact from COVID-19 virus restrictions and the resulting financial and community challenges may delay action, the above recommendations still have value and we encourage their consideration when resources are available.