

Office of State Fire Marshal issues new policy for egress windows in existing buildings

Owners of rental units should be aware that new standards for egress windows went into effect last November 1, according to State Fire Marshal Joseph Thomas. His notification states:

“Any building constructed after 1976 shall be required to comply with the requirement to provide 5.7 square feet of net clear opening with a minimum width of 20 inches and a minimum height of 24 inches. The window also must meet all other requirements for egress windows contained in the NFPA101 Life Safety Code.

“Any replacement windows installed in a building constructed after 1976 shall be required to meet the net clearing of 5.7 square feet. This shall be measured with the window in its natural open position.

“Any building constructed before 1976 will be allowed to meet the following specifications. The net clear opening would be allowed to meet the minimum 20 inches in width and 24 inches in height with a total net clear opening of 3.3 square feet; if the window is

constructed of wood or vinyl and the overall window sash size meets a minimum of 5.0 square feet. The window shall meet all other requirements for an egress window as specified in the NFPA101 Life Safety Code as adopted by the Office of the State Fire Marshal.

“Any replacement window installed in a building constructed prior to 1976 shall meet the same requirements as the existing windows and shall not reduce the existing net clear opening below the minimum requirements.

“Any existing window that has been previously approved will be allowed to continue in use. This policy does not prevent a local jurisdiction from adopting a more restrictive policy under an ordinance or life safety policy.”

For more information, call the Office of the State Fire Marshal at (207) 626-3870.

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Mainly Landlords

353 Water Street
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Mainly Landlords

For landlords with tenants who have Housing Choice Vouchers from MaineHousing

Fall/Winter 2013

www.mainehousing.org



Report on landlord focus groups

Complaints, suggestions aired at three MaineHousing sessions

From compliments on MaineHousing staff listening to landlords' concerns to complaints about too many unit inspections, landlords in the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program recently were able to express their views on how the process is working since its administration was moved in-house almost two years ago.

A series of three landlord forums held last October in Augusta, Auburn, and Bangor were attended by more than 50 landlords who offered wide-ranging remarks, including acknowledging the work of MaineHousing employees, and offering suggestions for improvements in specific procedures. Overall, the comments expressed were informative and enlightening, and many will become the impetus for improvements.

MaineHousing appreciated hearing the free-wielding exchanges, and believed the forums helped build a stronger working relationship between HCV staff and landlords.

Frank O'Hara, an analyst with Planning Decisions in Hallowell, facilitated the landlord forums and told MaineHousing that landlords believed the focus groups demonstrated an “attitude of listening” by MaineHousing staff.

Inspections

Landlords' primary complaint was the number of inspections. One landlord reported 10 inspections of one unit in less than four months. One viewed the repeated inspections as “harassment,” while another said, “we're getting inspected to death!”

The inspection process itself may be the reason for the number of unit visits: the

MaineHousing is responding to concerns addressed by landlords in a proactive way. Among the changes:

- HUD fair market rents are available on MaineHousing's website;
- Inspection information, and the submission of photos and documents to show evidence of code compliance, soon will be features available from the payment portal website;
- A new MaineHousing code standard is coming out this spring which will consolidate requirements from state and federal sources and explain them clearer.
- HUD is working on a new inspection regime that distinguishes between minor items and major life safety issues. The new approaches are being tested in other parts of the country, and at some point will be integrated into the new standard that will apply in Maine.
- The batching of multiple inspections is a possibility; however there are limits as to how much of this can be done because voucher leases have different time frames.

To view Frank O'Hara's report, visit www.mainehousing.org.

first inspection, a 24-hour reinspection to check if emergency health and safety failures have been corrected (as required by HUD), a 30-day fail reinspection for the

rest of the items, and if things are not fixed, additional notices, extensions, and reinspections.

Also, multiple agencies have been inspecting units the last couple of years, and MaineHousing now is required to repeat 5% of its inspections to confirm that their inspectors are doing a good job.

Besides quantity, landlords questioned why during a second inspection items missed in the first inspection are cited, wondered why failure rates are higher than before, and stressed that Housing Quality Standards are unclear and applied inconsistently among inspectors.

Other concerns were more process-oriented: listing the name of the inspector on the inspection letter so landlords know who to contact to arrange visiting times; narrowing the 8 a.m.-to-4 p.m. inspection timeframe window; and batching inspections in multiple-unit buildings to save time and money.

Tenants

The second biggest complaint among landlords was irresponsible tenants. Close to 7,000 individuals and families are on the waiting list for Section 8 vouchers, and the program is not increasing the number of vouchers. It is a “particular irritant” to landlords that some tenants remain in the program who are irresponsible, trash apartments, fail to make rental payments, use drugs, and simply move on to the next landlord, O'Hara wrote in his report.

From MaineHousing's perspective, the removal of evicted tenants from the Section 8 program is a complicated one. Landlords rarely go through the legal eviction process because it takes too long, may cost too

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Wintertime work extensions available

MaineHousing realizes that some home repairs cannot be completed during winter months. HCV Inspection Services staff will work with any owner who cannot make exterior repairs such as painting, siding, or roofing, which are “fails” during an annual inspection, and explain the process by which the repairs must be made.

Here’s what to do: After the inspection, contact Inspection Services to discuss the scope of work that cannot be completed until warmer weather. Program assistants then will confirm the needed repairs with the inspector.

Some important points to remember are:

- All other failed items must be corrected and re-inspected prior to an extension being granted;

- A weather-related extension cannot be granted for chipping and peeling paint when a child under six years old resides in the unit;
- A weather-related extension cannot be granted for a move-in inspection;
- A weather-related extension cannot be granted for interior work;
- A weather-related extension will not be granted after April 1, 2014.

You will be asked to sign an acknowledgement form that will highlight the scope of work that needs to be done as well as list a re-inspection date, which will generally be the end of June;

No further extensions will be granted after the re-inspection date.

Call ahead to schedule an inspection time

MaineHousing’s HCV Inspection Services department knows you don’t have time to wait for an inspector to arrive at your unit. We offer this solution.

For scheduling purposes, inspection letters will alert you that an inspection will occur on a specified day between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Unfortunately, we are unable to give a time. We suggest that you call the number given on the letter and tell the program assistant that you would like the inspector to call ahead that day with an approximate time. The inspector will have a better handle on how the day is going on that actual day.

available to answer any questions about the site.

Transition to direct deposit

MaineHousing now will be paying all Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) and Mod Rehab Housing Assistance Payments by direct deposit.

Direct deposit payments began January 1 for landlords already signed up for this program. If you are not already receiving direct deposit payments, please watch your mail through February for a sign-up form. Want to start immediately? Please call Susan at 626-4664 or Brenda at 624-5701 for a form.

MaineHousing expects the transition to direct-deposit payments to be completed by March 1. Please respond as soon as you receive your mailing!

Winter property checklist

Property maintenance continues in the winter months. The following tips could save money and extend the life of your home.

- Have the furnace or boiler inspected and cleaned by professionals. A cleaning will allow the furnace to run efficiently and effectively saving on heating costs. A ticket or sticker with the name of the technician, license number, and list of work done must be left either on the unit or nearby.
- Have all chimneys cleaned to reduce the risk of fire.
- Flip the switch on a ceiling fan so that the blades turn clockwise. This will force rising hot air down.
- Inspect windows for damaged caulking or cracks. Make sure windows are closed properly and locked.
- Make windows and doors airtight. Caulk around windows, apply fresh weather stripping if needed between the sash and window frame to eliminate air leaks. If plastic is used to cover windows, be sure that at least one window in each bedroom is left so that it will open for emergency exit. Also install weather stripping around the door to eliminate air leaks.
- Replace screens. Install storm windows and doors if applicable. If exterior wooden storm windows are installed, be sure that at least one window in each bedroom is left so that it will open for emergency exit.

Check heaters, electric connections

During the winter months, it’s important to make sure that tenants are careful about safety – theirs and that of your property. Making a quick check of your rental property and talking to tenants could prevent a potential disaster down the road. Here are a few helpful reminders:

- All space heaters should be checked for safety;
- Unvented gas space heaters can be dangerous both from fire safety and indoor air quality standpoints and should be removed at once; they are not allowed in Section 8 housing at any time;
- Plugging electric heaters into improperly rated extension cords is a fire hazard and should be avoided; if an electric heater is utilized make sure that any extension cord being used is properly rated;
- Under no circumstances should large propane cylinders be allowed inside a building;
- Make sure that any combustible materials are kept away from all heating sources including boilers, furnaces, wood stoves and space heaters; 18”-36” is the rule of thumb but always adhere to the distance listed on the appliance;
- Do not allow improper use of extension cords, multiple plug-in devices, and tenant spliced connections.

- Stock up on essentials like salt or ice melt.
- Check all smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors. Replace batteries where needed.
- Plug hidden leaks. Check pipes, vents, walls, ceilings, floors, under sinks, and in basements for gaps, cracks, or holes. Fill them with insulating foam sealant or silicone.
- Seal up any entry points to prevent small animals from entering the home. Mice can slip through a space as thin as a dime.
- Protect pipes from freezing. Wrap them in foam insulation tubes.
- Add insulation where needed.
- Most importantly always keep your entrances and exits clear of debris so in the event of an emergency people can evacuate without injury or delay.

Landlord focus groups report

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much in legal fees, and tenants may “trash” the unit in the interim. Landlords, too, may not notify MaineHousing that a person was evicted, is falling behind on rents, or is damaging the apartment. “MaineHousing does have the power to terminate a tenant from the program, but the process involves a hearing and requires documentation, and in practice is a rare occurrence,” O’Hara wrote.

On forcing “deadbeat tenants” to pay past bills, MaineHousing follows HUD requirements and views the collection of the landlord portion of rents to be the landlords’ responsibility. Landlords, however, mentioned that they believe the voucher administrator – MaineHousing – is the party with the strongest leverage with tenants.

MaineHousing is considering ways to put “tenant responsibility” in the program. Encouraging landlords to provide documentation of tenant problems is one pursuit, while another idea under consideration is whether the agency can provide some information to landlords about the past rental experience of tenants in the program who are applying to move to the landlords’ units.

MaineHousing Partner Portal

MaineHousing’s Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCV) is excited to offer participating landlords a new way to access Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) information – the online and secure MaineHousing Partner Portal.

In addition to being able to view your HAPs, you also are able to view tenant information, your housing units, abatements or payment holds, and helpful information and forms such as a “move-in inspection checklist.”

You may create a MaineHousing Partner Portal account at <https://partnerportal.mainehousing.org>. When filling in the form, please use the information you provided on your W-9 at lease up. An automatic message will be sent to your email inbox.

MaineHousing needs to approve you as a user before you are able to sign in.

If you are an agent that manages several properties using different tax identifications, please call Brenda Chabre at (207) 624-5701 to set up your account. Brenda also is

