



Rent Smart

Module B

Checking Out the Rental Property and the Landlord



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Rent Smart 2017 focuses on the knowledge and skills essential for a successful renting experience. It challenges participants to know and understand their rights and responsibilities as a tenant as well as know and understand the rights and responsibilities of their landlord. Emphasis is on forming a strong partnership between the tenant and landlord. **Rent Smart** was originally based on information collected through focus groups held with property managers and tenant advocates. It was piloted under its original name, **Good Neighbor-Good Tenant**, for several years, then taught as **Rent Smart** in numerous Wisconsin counties for the past 15 years.

Rent Smart 2017 participant goals include:

- Learn new skills to build positive relationships with landlords and neighbors.
- Gain confidence in their ability to find and maintain affordable housing.
- Understand the application and screening processes used by landlords.
- Learn the responsibilities and rights of tenants and landlords.

The 2017 revised curriculum continues to emphasize an active learning approach designed to foster participant motivation and course effectiveness. Videos, case studies and internet links have been incorporated in the updated curriculum to provide additional interactive learning options. The 2017 revised curriculum consists of six modules, designed to be taught separately or in combination.

Rent Smart 2017 Modules:

- How Much Will It Cost? And Can I Afford It?
- **Checking Out the Rental Property and the Landlord**
- Application Process
- Who's Responsible for Maintenance, Repairs and Care?
- Communications
- Rental Agreements—Moving In, Moving On

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References to websites and resources used in this publication are not an endorsement of one product over other similar products.

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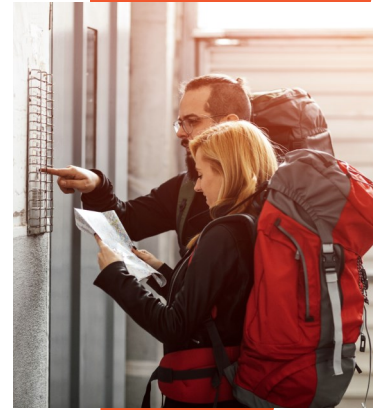
Overview

The important task of selecting the right rental unit can be an overwhelming challenge. Unfortunately, many potential tenants make the decision to rent without thinking through what they want and need in a rental unit.

Time needs to be spent comparing various rental properties, including comparing amount of rent to be paid, associated costs and transportation issues.

The goal of this module is to encourage participants to plan ahead in their search and not waste time looking at rental properties that are not right for them and/or affordable. This module provides tools for potential tenants to use to determine the most important considerations. Tips for comparing properties will be shared along with the need to do an inspection of the property before signing any documents.

Another consideration when renting is the importance of entering a business relationship with the landlord/property manager. The quality of this relationship can impact the tenants' quality of life. Potential tenants also need to consider, if they will be comfortable establishing and maintaining a business relationship with a particular landlord or property manager.



References

- Tenant Resource Center: <http://www.tenantresourcecenter.org/>
- Legal Action of Wisconsin: <http://www.legalaction.org/> Tenant Source Book: (http://www.legalaction.org/content/index.cfm?cm_id=83)
- Video walk through on RentPrep site: <http://www.rentprep.com/apartment-marketing/youtube-fill-rental-property-vacancies/>
- Sexual Offender Registry Database: <http://offender.doc.state.wi.us/public/>
- Wisconsin Housing Search: <http://www.wihousingsearch.org>

Objectives

Participants will:

1. Identify what they want and need in a rental unit.
2. Identify resources to help locate potential rental properties.
3. Learn strategies for comparing and inspecting rental units.
4. Increase readiness and confidence in securing rental property.

Many potential tenants make the decision to rent without thinking through what they want and need in a rental unit.



Activities

Activity 1: Determining Your Housing Needs

Activity 2: How to Locate a Rental Unit

Activity 3: Finding Affordable Housing

Activity 4: Comparing and Inspecting Rental Units

Activity 5: Discussion about Challenging Situations that Impact the Ability to Rent

Activity 6: Building and Maintaining a Relationship with the Landlord/Property Manager

Teaching Outline

Provide the *Overall Handout* before beginning the module.

Suggested Introduction

Moving can be time consuming and expensive. In addition to rent, there is the security deposit, moving costs, utility hook-ups, and so on. During this module we will discuss what you want and need in a rental unit.

You will do a better job of comparison shopping and ultimately in choosing the right rental unit if you have identified what you want and need as well as determine how much rent you can afford. This process will help you be comfortable establishing and maintaining a business relationship with your landlord/property manager.

Activity 1: Determining Your Housing Needs

(Objective 1: Identify what they want and need in a rental unit.)

- Handout 1: *My Housing Needs*

Suggested Introduction: Before you start your search, you need to determine which features are must-haves and which are conveniences you can live without. Keep in mind that you may need to make some concessions to stay within your budget.

Distribute Handout 1: *My Housing Needs*. Ask each participant to rank items by importance on the worksheet. In pairs compare responses. Each group can then share one item they identified as “Very Important” or “Moderately Important” and repeat this process until all the items on these columns are listed on a flip chart.

Following completion of this task, facilitate a group discussion. Here are some questions for starting the discussion:

- How did ranking importance of items help you focus on what is important to you?
- After listening to the other groups, which items would you move up on your list?
- How will the choices you make affect where and how you look for a rental unit?

OPTIONAL: If there is access to internet in the room where this module is being taught, ask participants to suggest the amount of rent they are willing and able to pay per month. You can google “Apartments Available in (name of community) for \$(insert amount here) per month.” Many rental properties can be viewed on-line so participants can get a sense of what is available in their price range.

Activity 2: How to Locate a Rental Unit

(Objective 2: Identify resources to help locate potential rental properties.)

- No Handouts

Suggested Introduction: Once you know what you are looking for and how much you can afford; you can start searching for rental units. There are many ways to locate rental housing.

Ask participants to share sources they have used when looking for rental housing. Put their ideas on a flip chart or white board. Here are some possible options:

- Friends and family
- Print sources, i.e., newspaper, rental magazines
- Bulletin boards located in businesses
- “For rent” signs
- Non-profit housing agencies
- Faith community
- Electronic bulletin boards, Facebook, websites
- Apps
- Property management company
- Wisconsin Housing Search (<http://www.wihousingsearch.org>)

Discuss advantages and disadvantages of each source.

Once you know what you are looking for and how much you can afford; you can start searching for rental units.



OPTIONAL: Share specific sources in your community, i.e., websites, electronic bulletin boards. If there is access to the internet in the room where this lesson is being taught, you can show these sites to participants. Many public libraries provide free computer access.

Activity 3: Finding Affordable Housing

(Objective 2: Identify resources to help locate potential rental properties.)

- Handout 2: *Affordable Rental Unit Options & Contact Information*

Instructors should identify local resources, eligibility requirements, and contact information that can be distributed to participants. Communities may have affordable housing options that are unique.

OPTIONAL: Invite local housing authority staff to be a guest speaker and share information about available program(s).

Suggested Introduction: Finding a rental unit that meets your needs and your budget is not always easy. Fortunately, there are programs that can make rent more affordable.

Provide Handout 2: *Affordable Rental Unit Options & Contact Information* to serve as a guide to sharing information about local affordable housing options.

Activity 4: Comparing and Inspecting Rental Units

(Objective 3: Learn strategies for comparing and inspecting rental units.)

- Handout 3: *Case Study Matrix*
- Instructor Materials: *Case Study Comparison Units Completed Checklists*. Select those appropriate for class based on program participants.
- Handout 4: *Rental Property Checklist*
- Handout 5: *Don't Rent Trouble*
- Flashlight, hairdryer, light bulb, paper/pencil if you will be using pictures and props instead of video.

Provide Handout 3: *Case Study Matrix* and the *Case Study Comparison Units Completed Checklist(s)* appropriate for the class. Individually, or in groups of three to four, have participants read the assigned case study on Handout 3: *Case Study Matrix* and review the corresponding *Case Study Comparison Units Completed Checklists*. Have participants select the best rental unit for their assigned case by reading the assigned case study and determining which Unit (A, B, or C) best meets the renter's needs and budget.

Ask participants the following questions after they have read the case study in the matrix and reviewed the *Case Study Comparison Units Completed Checklists*.

- Which unit is most convenient?
- Which rental unit has more of what the tenant wants? Why?
- Which has the most features/conveniences?
- Which feature would be important to the tenant?
- If you were the tenant, which would you choose? Why?

Provide Handout 4: *Rental Property Checklist* and Handout 5: *Don't Rent Trouble*.

Suggested Introduction: You may use the blank *Rental Property Checklist* for comparing rental units in your own search. However, finding a decent place to live also requires a thorough tour and inspection. This is your potential home, so treat your first visit like an inspection. It is helpful to have a process for comparing units.

Show video introducing how to inspect a rental unit from UW-Extension: <https://youtu.be/srTnJBD52Y>. Discuss the list of things to inspect on Handout 5: *Don't Rent Trouble*. If you do not have the ability to show a video, bring the listed props and discuss Handout 5: *Don't Rent Trouble*.

Activity 5: Discussion about Challenging Situations that Impact the Ability to Rent

(Objective 4: Increase readiness and confidence in securing rental property.)

- No Handouts

Instructors should contact the town, village, or city hall where the participants will be seeking rental unit so that they are capable of discussing local ordinances and how criminal convictions are handled.

Suggested Introduction: The Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (including children under the age of 18 living with parents or legal custodians, pregnant women, people securing custody of children under the age of 18), and handicap (disability). The Fair Housing Act covers most housing. In some circumstances, the Act exempts owner-occupied buildings with no more than four units, single-family housing sold or rented without the use of a broker, and housing operated by organizations and private clubs that limit occupancy to members.

The Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status (including children under the age of 18 living with parents or legal custodians, pregnant women, people securing custody of children under the age of 18), and handicap (disability).

Communities can regulate how closely certain sexual offenders can live in proximity to schools, parks, and daycare centers. The Wisconsin Department of Corrections sex offender registry was established in June 1997 due to the enactment of Wisconsin Act 440-Wisconsin Statutes 301.45 and 301.46. This law requires registration of individuals who have been convicted of certain sexual offenses. By law, the registry generally contains information on those individuals who were convicted of, incarcerated, or on supervision for a sex offense **on or after December 25, 1993. It is not a list of every person who has ever committed, been arrested for, or convicted of a sex offense.** If a person has not been convicted of a qualifying offense, or if information has not been submitted about that person, information about that person may not be included in the registry. The information contained in the registry will not reflect the entire criminal history of a particular individual. To access the Sexual Offender Registry Database, use the following address: <http://offender.doc.state.wi.us/public/>



Activity 6: Building and Maintaining a Relationship with the Landlord/Property Manager

(Objective 4: Increase readiness and confidence in securing rental property.)

- Handout 6: *Interviewing Landlords/Property Managers*

Suggested Introduction: During the time spent inspecting rental units, the potential tenant can use this opportunity to decide if he/she will be comfortable establishing and maintaining a business relationship with a particular landlord/property manager. Doing so will give tenants insights into landlord/property manager customer service style, and help them choose buildings where repairs are dealt with quickly and in a professional manner.

There are many types of landlords/property managers, from professional companies managing a large number of units to homeowners renting a duplex. Each may have a different style of management that may or may not match the lifestyle of the tenant. Most, but not all, landlords/managers are professional, competent, and use good rental practices. Tenants should learn about the landlord/property manager before they rent.

When someone applies for rental housing, the landlord/property manager takes steps to verify the information provided on the application. He or she may contact your current or previous landlord/property manager for a reference, order a credit report, and run a criminal background check.

While the landlord/property manager is obtaining information about you, it is important for you to seek information about this individual.

Provide Handout 6: *Interviewing Landlords/Property Managers*.

OPTIONAL: Ask participants to find a partner. In partners, ask them to determine who will be the landlord/property manager and the tenant to role-play. The individual who will be the tenant can interview the landlord/property manager using the list of questions on Handout 6: *Interviewing Landlords/Property Managers*. After five minutes switch roles and ask other questions on the sheet.

Following completion of the interviews, ask participants to respond to the following questions.

- Does this individual listen to the questions you ask and provide sufficient answers?
- Were you treated respectfully?
- If probing questions were asked, did you consider them to be appropriate or were they intrusive?
- Do you feel that you could maintain a business relationship with this individual?
- How comfortable did you feel while interviewing the landlord/property manager?
- What did you learn in your conversation with this individual?
- What types of questions did you find most helpful in obtaining information from the landlord/tenant?



Discuss other sources of information that can be helpful when a prospective tenant wants to learn more about a landlord/property manager.

- CCAP stands for Consolidated Court Automation Programs in Wisconsin. This site provides public access to Wisconsin Circuit Court Records. <https://wcca.wicourts.gov>
- The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) is the state's primary consumer protection agency. The Bureau of Consumer Protection has broad authority to regulate unfair business practices. This state agency handles landlord/tenant issues. datcp.wi.gov
- Housing or building inspectors in the community where you are looking to rent may have information regarding issues of repairs not being made by the landlord/property manager.
- Local public safety departments may track number of calls made to rental properties in the community.

If you find negative information about a landlord from one source, it does not mean the person is a bad landlord. It does mean that the potential tenant should investigate further to see if the information is accurate.

Advise participants that if they find negative information about a landlord/property manager from one source, it does not mean the person is a bad landlord. It does mean that the information should be investigated further to ensure accuracy.

OPTIONAL: Ask a landlord/property manager to attend this session and be interviewed by participants.

Learning Assessment

Have participants learned the key concepts of this Rent Smart module? The following questions or activities are recommended to assess participant understanding of the information covered in this module.

- Identify at least two features that are important to them in rental housing. Discuss how these features will affect the way in which they shop for housing.
- List resources they would be likely to use in trying to find rental housing.
- Name at least two things they would inspect prior to making a decision to rent the property.
- Share how they will prepare themselves when talking to the landlord/property manager about a prospective rental unit.