

The Daily Pennsylvanian

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OPINION

DAILY STATISTIC

900

Tickets that have been sold so far for the Spring Fling concert, which will be headlined by O.A.R. — about 500 more than were sold all last year

RETURN OF THE SALAD | CEZARY PODKUL

Landlords ignore tenant concerns

Students living off campus aren't just cool — they're often freezing, because some landlords pay them little attention

You've seen the ads from Campus Apartments that declare, "Cool people live off campus."

And given that roughly 4,000 of Penn's 10,000 undergraduate students live off campus, our coolness ratio is about 40 percent.

But I think that people who live off campus are more than cool. Frankly, many of them are freezing.

College senior Pierre Gooding and his roommates, who rent a house from University City Housing, recently experienced a gas leak. They repeatedly called UCH to have the leak fixed, but no one ever came. So they had no choice but to turn off the gas. And as you're reading this column, they're still without heat.

But not that UCH cares.

Sound familiar?

But it's not just heating. Look at the scorecards of many major nearby University City landlords, available through Penn's Office of Off-Campus Living, and you'll notice a consistent pattern of C's and D's in everything from basic customer service to response rate to major repairs and emergencies.

Collectively, University City landlords treat students like crap.

Sometimes literally.

Another group of students that rents a house from UCH had a sewage leak in its basement that stunk up the whole house. It took days of irate phone calls to get UCH to fix the problem, and the mess was never thoroughly cleaned up.

But that's only the beginning of their concerns. Among the host of problems one anonymous tenant described to me were: pigeons roosting inside their walls, cockroaches, leaks, holes in walls and ceilings and poorly insulated windows that let out all the heat.

And, at an average monthly rent of \$700 per

tenant, UCH will collect around \$60,000 in rent from these poor tenants this year.

How do landlords — or, more appropriately, slumlords — such as UCH get away with such robbery?

The company knows that, for most Penn students, this is the first time they are renting properties and living on their own. Consequently, many Penn students who live off campus are ignorant of their rights as tenants and avenues of protecting them.

They also know that Penn students are busy enough with schoolwork that they are willing to put up with minor inconveniences for a long time. Hence, Band-Aid solutions that make problems go away until finals are over become the norm.

The slumlords thrive and rejoice in this ignorance and apathy. Hence, to get better treatment, Penn students need to become more educated tenants.

Luckily, there's a whole office devoted precisely to that purpose. The aforementioned Office of Off-Campus Living, located at 4046 Walnut St., offers a great deal of educational materials and free monthly seminars on how to help locate housing, deal with landlords and other housing issues. OCL also offers a wealth of information — such as surveys and housing scorecards for all landlords registered with Penn — through its Web site.

And, not surprisingly, the office is grossly underutilized by students. Miki Farcas, the director of OCL, said that, in a typical year, her officer interacts with about 600 students.

So take advantage of OCL's resources. For example, did you know that, if you are having a dispute with a Penn-registered landlord, OCL can step in and help you mediate the conflict? Or, should it become necessary, refer you to legal counsel? When your landlord receives a call from OCL, it will definitely carry



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more weight than an angry phone call from you or your parents.

Luckily, for once, the city of Philadelphia is also on your side.

On March 9, Mayor John Street signed into law the Rental Suitability Bill, which will require that prospective landlords provide their tenants with a city certification stating that the rental property in question does not have health or safety defects.

This means that, come next year, it will be harder for slumlords to get away with renting sub-standard housing.

"What is innovative about this bill is that it is proactive because the landlord has to act before renting property," Farcas said.

Take advantage of this.

In searching for housing next spring, make sure that your landlord gives you a copy of the city certification that the property that you are renting has no code violations. More importantly, if you spot any code violations, call the Department of Licenses and Inspections — (215) 686-2463 — and request an inspection.

And don't just blindly sign your lease; add terms favorable to you and your roommates. And negotiate. Engineering senior Andrew Franklin and his roommates convinced their landlord to give them a \$600 reduction in their first month's rent because terms that they added to the lease regarding the cleanliness of their house upon move-in were not met.

So be assertive of your rights as a tenant. Take some time to learn about the many resources available to off-campus residents, since it's much harder for slumlords to take advantage of educated tenants.