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As students move in, city vows vigilance on safety

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 01, 2014



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As thousands of students return to America's college capital this week, Boston city officials are vowing, as they have in years past, to step up code enforcement of crowded, frequently shoddy off-campus housing.

But they are facing a set of stiff realities: The city has fallen short of promises to increase the number of inspectors. Some landlords and tenants have resisted efforts to follow city housing codes. And students themselves say they are forced to share crowded apartments simply to afford the rent.



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One is Joohmahn Kim, a Boston University junior, who said last week he knows that he and six roommates will be violating a city rule banning more than four full-time undergraduates from sharing a house or apartment.

“Even if the city does enforce it, I don’t think they will be able to for at least a few years anyway, so I’ll be fine,” the 21-year-old California native said as he prepared to carry a case of bottled water into his new apartment in Allston.

The city, in response to a recent Globe Spotlight Team [series](#) on

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unsafe, crowded, and sometimes illegal off-campus apartments, has vowed to more stringently enforce the 2008 rule limiting the number of undergraduates in each apartment.

This year, city officials say, is going to be different.

“We’re better prepared, we have better strategies, we have better data,” said William Christopher Jr., whom Mayor Martin J. Walsh named as the new commissioner of inspectional services in May, days after the Spotlight series. “Everybody’s aware that this is a priority for the mayor and we’re going to be very aggressive, and it’s a positive message: ‘We’re here to help.’ ”

Over the weekend, city officials issued citations for infractions as they scoured the student neighborhoods while renters moved in and out.



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*‘I don’t think it’s the tenants’ fault.
It’s the landlords’ fault.’*

Boston University student Joohmahn Kim, who says the high cost of rentals have forced him to move into an apartment with six roommates



On Sunday, housing inspectors Iris Jones and Marcio Fonseca Jr. carried lists of addresses where problems were suspected as they walked up and down Linden Street in Allston. The two took note of debris left outside buildings, toured apartments, stuffed informational pamphlets in door jambs, and chatted with movers.

City officials say they will soon have a new database to identify overcrowded apartments. The Boston City Council voted two weeks ago to require that colleges with buildings in Boston provide the city with a list of off-campus addresses where students are living.

However, the city has fallen short in some of its housing commitments. Walsh had vowed to increase the

number of inspectors, but that has not happened yet. And the city this summer was only able to inspect a very small fraction of units suspected of student overcrowding.

After a fire at an off-campus apartment in Allston in April 2013 killed Binland Lee, a 22-year-old Boston University student, community activists called on colleges in Boston to release the addresses of their off-campus students to enable the city to detect overcrowded living conditions.

Most universities, citing privacy concerns, resisted until June , when Walsh met with college leaders, who largely agreed to disclose the addresses. The City Council formalized the regimen on Aug. 20 by amending the city's University Accountability Ordinance, which requires colleges to provide a breakdown of the number of students living in each ZIP code.

Now institutions must include the address and unit number for student apartments, as well as whether the individual is an undergraduate or graduate student, by Nov. 15 each fall, and within 45 days of the beginning of each semester or quarter. It is an anonymous report and no student names will be included, but it will help inspectors identify potential trouble spots.

"Some folks may think this is a bureaucratic issue, but really it is a matter of life and death, since without that data it is almost impossible for the city to track and discover student overcrowding and unsafe housing conditions," Richard Giordano, civic engagement director of the Fenway Community Development Corporation, recently wrote Fenway residents.

Nonetheless, numerous students surveyed last week while lugging boxes and furniture into their new apartments said they plan to live with five or more undergraduates. They said landlords and real estate agents continue to turn a blind eye and that units are unaffordable unless shared by more than four undergraduates.

"If you look at the listings for all of the houses in this neighborhood online, they're all marketed as six and seven bedrooms," said Kim, pointing at the houses across the street from his new home. "I don't think it's the tenants' fault. It's the landlords' fault."

Kim said he and all six of his roommates signed the lease to rent the house and that he does not remember their realty agent ever mentioning the city rule banning more than four undergraduates from living together in off-campus housing.

Given the Nov. 15 deadline, it will be more than two months before anyone has a better handle on how widely the zoning rule is being violated, but a Spotlight Team survey last year found that nearly one-third of 266 students questioned said at least five undergraduates were sharing living quarters.

Over the summer, city inspectors attempted to investigate overcrowding in 137 apartments but were able to get tenants or landlords to let them into only six units. Even so, officials found eight emergency violations of the state sanitary code in those six apartments. Inspectors planned to revisit the 131 properties where they could not gain access.

Valerie K. Frias, associate director of the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation, who has been pushing for the student address database, said she wishes the city was further along in its efforts to inspect potentially overcrowded units. But she said she is hopeful that progress will be made in the coming months as the city compiles its database.

“I think the city takes this issue seriously, but I think they have limited resources,” said Frias.

The Globe series also uncovered widespread sanitary problems in Allston, Brighton, Fenway, and Mission Hill, where students were living with a host of indignities and hazards, from rodent and pest infestations, to doors without working locks, to missing smoke detectors, and bedrooms crammed illegally into basements or firetrap attics.

One of the most notorious landlords of college students, Anwar N. Faisal and his Allston-based company Alpha Management Corp., have been defendants in at least 22 lawsuits and 11 criminal complaints in Boston Housing Court, according to court and city records. In the same period, he has received 469 code enforcement tickets totaling \$51,720 for violations outside his buildings, including overloaded trash bins, but paid only \$3,010 in fines.

Faisal’s business practices have drawn intense scrutiny from city and state officials since the Spotlight series.

In August, Faisal appeared before a City Council committee and said he was “extremely disappointed” to be accused of being one of the city’s worst landlords and insisted that he was improving how he maintains his apartments and handled tenant complaints.

Some student tenants near Northeastern University said that Alpha has improved maintenance and made repairs over the past month or so. But one outgoing tenant said an Alpha worker told him the improvements were made only to appease inspectors scheduled to visit and not to address longstanding complaints.

Northeastern junior Patrick Burden, 21, of Lynnfield, moved out of an Alpha-owned unit at 115 St. Stephen St. He said he and a roommate last fall needed housing on short notice and had few other options aside from a tiny one-bedroom in the basement that still cost them \$1,800 a month.

When they moved in, the bathroom floor tiles were shattered and mold was growing, he said. The unit’s smoke detectors were stuffed in a kitchen cabinet. The old dishwasher broke and still does not run, he said. Roaches and ants are common.

Burden said that, for the first few months, he regularly reported the problems to Alpha, which has a management office near the building’s entrance. No maintenance workers ever came by. He eventually gave up.

A couple of weeks ago, an Alpha employee finally visited to install smoke detectors.

“He said sorry that he hadn’t come by sooner, but that he was here now because the inspectors are coming

soon,” recalled Burden.

Joshua Krefetz, a lawyer for Faisal, could not be reached for comment.

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