Housing

In these modules, we will discuss Life in the US. There are many differences in living in a new country. You may notice that the standard way of doing things in the U.S. may be very different from what you are accustomed to back home.

You’ve made it to Rapid City, South Dakota! What! Where?? South Dakota is in the middle of the U.S. It is a very rural area but full of beauty. South Dakota has a population of about 885,000 people. Rapid City, its second largest city, has a population of about 76,000 people. It is a small community. Students start wondering where am I going to live? Many international students worry about housing. It can be a scary and uncertain time. Will I have a place? Is the neighborhood ok? What is a deposit? What is included and what is not? There are many more questions that we will try to answer in these next couple of modules.

Part 1: Housing – General Information

Students can find apartments for rent that vary from $350 to $900. This can be split between two people. When looking for a place to live, you need to keep certain things in mind besides location such as: utility costs, length of lease, monthly rent, and security deposit. There are many places close to campus and some farther out that require transportation.

Let’s start with utilities. Utilities include, but are not limited to, electric, gas, water, possibly internet and cable. Is parking included or extra? What about garbage fees? All these items need to be considered when renting an apartment. Some utilities are included in the rent, but some are extra. It’s important to find out what is and what is not included. Furniture is usually not included, and rent will cost more if you get a furnished apartment.

Rent. When you first rent an apartment, you will be asked to pay a security deposit. This deposit is equal to one month’s rent and it is paid to cover any damages that might occur while you are living there. If you leave the apartment in good shape, your deposit will be returned to you in full. If you have damages that are your fault, it will be subtracted from your deposit. You also need to give proper notice to the landlord when moving out. Make sure to read the lease on how much advance notification time is required.

A couple things to keep in mind about the security deposit:

1. Make a list of pre-existing damage and have the owner sign it
2. Only pay for damages beyond normal “wear & tear”
3. The deposit MUST be returned by 2 weeks after move-out date.
4. Provide the landlord a new address to send the check to
5. If all is not returned, the landlord must provide an itemized repair list of what was taken out of the deposit.

In the documents folder, there are lists of utility and cable companies you will need to call in order to have utilities turned on at your new apartment.

In the next Module, we will discuss contracts or leases and what you need to be careful about.

Part 2 Housing – Contracts, leases, insurance, OH MY!
Legal terms can be difficult. We are here to help when we can. You can do your part by following these simple tips.

First, you have the right to inspect the apartment you will be living in BEFORE signing the contract. Everything can look good in photos. That is why you need to inspect places before doing any business with someone. This is very important.

What the contract says is IMPORTANT and legally binding – Read it!! You should take a day to read over these and if you don’t understand something, ask. It is important that you understand what you are signing. Some parts of a contract can be negotiable. For example: length of lease, shoveling sidewalks, cutting grass, etc.

Get any changes in writing. Everyone must agree. Don’t trust verbal statements. If a landlord will not write something in the agreement, do not trust them.

When inspecting the apartment before signing the contract, make a list of pre-existing damage. Take photos and make sure you and the owner agree on the list by signing it. Everyone should have one copy of this list for your personal records. When you move out, this list will be helpful to make sure you get your deposit back. In the documents section are examples of lists that you can use.

Repairs. Repairs must be done by the landlord. Do not fix anything yourself or have someone do it for you. Make sure to tell the landlord right away if something is damaged. Some landlords have a portal account you can go into to make repair requests. This is to give you and the landlord a written summary of when you reported the issue and where it is in the repair process.

When the landlord makes the repairs, they must give you 24-hours’ notice before entering your apartment at any time unless it’s an emergency (such as your apartment is flooding or on fire). They will give you an estimated time of when the inspection and repairs will take place. If the landlord must order a part, they must keep you informed and again give another 24-hour notice when coming back. Remember: 24-hour notice is required. If they do not do this, report this to the Ivanhoe International Center staff immediately. We will do what we can to help.

A couple of things to keep in mind when renting an apartment:

- Do not violate the contract terms.
  - If there are only supposed to be two people living in the apartment, do not have three. This can jeopardize your lease.
  - It can also look bad when you try to rent another apartment.
  - When moving out, make sure to give proper notice. Usually, you must give 30 days’ notice when you will move out. Not doing so can violate your contract and possibly cause your deposit to be forfeited.
  - When you move out you must clean the apartment. Not only is this in the contract, but you could lose your deposit if you do not. Pay attention to the contract - some landlords require that specific carpet cleaning companies be hired by you when moving out.

- Breaking a contract.
  - If you break a contract, you could be paying monthly for a place you do not live in until the landlord finds a new tenant
  - This can give you a bad reference for the next apartment you are trying to rent too.
Many rental groups will call others to find out how good or bad a tenant is. Do not be a bad tenant.

- Renter’s Insurance
  - If there are any issues such as a fire, water damage or theft, the apartment complex is not liable to pay damages for your property. Having renter’s insurance will help you replace items you may lose. Rental insurance is inexpensive, and many auto insurance companies offer it along with your auto insurance policy.

In the documents folder, you will find Rental agreement terminology and some examples.

**Part 3 Housing – Roommates**

You found a place! Now, you need someone to share the costs. The Ivanhoe International Center staff sends out emails three times a year asking if someone needs a roommate. You can contact them for a list or to be put on the list.

As with your apartment contract, you should have a roommate contract. Roommate contracts are great, especially, if you do not know the person. They protect you and the roommate from unnecessary fighting and issues. Set up specifics like …… when are rent and utilities due, who oversees paying these, are groceries and cleaning items shared or separate? Bathroom, kitchen, and general cleaning schedules. What about quiet times for studying and when guests can visit. As much as we like to think we are a perfect roommate, things can go wrong and issues can occur. Having tasks set up can alleviate these issues.

The Ivanhoe International Center staff can hold onto your agreements for any future issues. However, we will not help with roommate disagreements. You are all adults and that is how we treat you. You will need to solve your issues on your own and the roommate agreements can help.

In the Documents folder, there are a couple of examples of Roommate Agreements to help you and your roommate form a good plan.

**Part 4: Housing – Last Thoughts**

When you look for an apartment, there is a lot of terminology to be familiar with, so you understand what you are getting. For example: A/C means air conditioning, BA means full bathroom (toilet, sink, and bath or shower) bldg. means building, BR or bdrm means bedroom. There are a lot more so check out the Housing terminology in the documents folder.

Locking yourself out! We all sometimes forget things. This will happen. It’s good to find someone that can help when you do such things. Once you find someone to trust, ask them if they would keep a spare key to your apartment in case you lock yourself out. If you do not have a spare key somewhere else, it could cost you a lot of money to have your landlord open the door for you.

Setting up your place can be expensive. Look for deals in the newspaper, online and ask friends that have been here awhile. The International Students Inc staff also have some items they can loan you. Don’t worry about getting everything immediately and don’t try to bring everything with you. That can be more expensive and burdensome. Caution when looking online for items: ask the Ivanhoe
International Center or International Students Inc staff if it’s a good deal. Some online sale items are scams. Also, when meeting someone to purchase and pick up items, do not go by yourself. Make sure there is someone else there with you. Safety in numbers.

Remember to check the documents folder for more information on these items and other important information.