

SPOTTING SIGNS OF ILLEGAL ACTIVITY

As a landlord, you already know how important it is to take an occasional drive-by of your rental property. A periodic walk-through is also important, as well. And there is no question that those simple steps can often save thousands of dollars in maintenance and repairs. It's easy to know what to look for when checking the batteries in the smoke detector or for mold and mildew, but unless you have a few clues, it's not always so obvious to know what signs point to illegal activity. Here are a few clues:

1. If you smell cat urine and there's no cat, or if the smell is far too strong for only one cat, get out immediately. There may be a meth lab in the unit.
2. Chemical odors, like ether or "hospital" smells often signal drug activity.
3. Excessive moisture in the unit could be a sign of marijuana growing. It can cause thousands of dollars worth of damages to your property.
4. Check the wiring. Marijuana growers use excessive electricity and often try to cover-up by rewiring to bypass the meter or connect to neighbors' meters.
5. Confirm if the occupant is the very same person listed on the rental agreement, as odd as this sounds.

A popular tactic used by drug dealers, scam artists, identity thieves, and others planning illegal activities, is to have a clean-cut, respectable-looking person (usually female) with acceptable credit and references, rent the property for them. She never actually moves in and lives there, however. It's almost impossible to catch this one up-front, but you can nip it in the bud by visiting your property regularly to make sure the person living there is the one you screened.

You can also work to prevent drug activity in your properties by using caution when screening all your applicants. People who work for small, private companies should be asked to provide several recent pay stubs. Look up the company in a phone book, your State Department of Business Licensing, State Department of Revenue, or Better Business Bureau to see if it is a real company.

A bank account reference is also important, even if it is just a savings account. Watch for people who seem to be living a fairly affluent lifestyle, but claim to have no bank account and who pay cash for everything. Some people actually do, and they may be completely legitimate. But, people involved in illegal activities try to never leave a paper trail of any type and usually deal in cash only.

Watching out for illegal activity does not have to lead to feeling paranoid or overly cautious. Most tenants are law-abiding citizens who do pay their rent. But when searching for a new tenant, it pays to pay attention.

Reprinted in part from
Jackson Area Landlords Association