



Bureau of Fire Safety  
& Housing Inspection  
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## **MEMORANDUM**

TO: Mayor & Council

FROM: William S. Drake  
Fire Official

DATE: May 8, 2014

RE: Municipal Housing Inspection Program

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As requested, I have prepared a brief overview of the municipal rental housing program:

As you are aware, the municipal housing inspection ordinances were “harmonized” in June of 2013. Prior to the municipal consolidation, the Bureau of Fire Safety & Housing Inspection performed rental housing inspections in Princeton Borough, and the Construction Department performed rental housing inspections in Princeton Township.

As a result of consolidation and harmonization, the Bureau of Fire Safety & Housing Inspection performs inspections for all one- and two-Family dwellings that are held for rent. We currently have registered approximately 776 residential rental properties containing 902 rental units. Of the 776 residential rental properties, 649 properties are single family rental homes, and 127 are homes containing two rental units (duplex). The number of rental properties and number of rental unit’s change frequently as homes are sold or become owner-occupied or when new rentals come on the market. It is important to know that buildings containing three or more dwelling units or apartments are considered multiple family dwellings, and as such are inspected by the NJ Department of Community Affairs.

The municipal ordinance calls for all one- and two-family rental properties to be inspected at least once every two years. Additionally, the ordinance provides authority to the staff to conduct inspections whenever a valid complaint is received, or in the case of problem properties, whenever the number and/or nature of previous violations at a property warrants more frequent inspections. It should be noted that all staff members of the Bureau of Fire Safety & Housing Inspection have recently completed training in performing rental housing inspections I am also investigating the need for additional staffing at this time.

The municipal ordinance contains the technical provisions for rental housing inspections. As a minimum, all rental properties must comply with the NJ State Housing Code. Princeton has adopted additional provisions based on local conditions and experience, primarily relating to overcrowding enforcement. In general, the technical provisions of the housing code fall into one of two categories – vital facilities and general maintenance. Vital facilities include the provisions of heat (between October 1 and May 1), running water, hot water facilities, plumbing and sanitary sewer facilities. In many cases, the staff has the authority to serve a summons and complaint on a landlord immediately if we find a deficiency in vital facilities. General maintenance requirements would encompass items such as properly maintaining painted surfaces, floors, windows, doors, door locks, and similar items. A landlord has to be given a notice of violation and a time period to correct the violations (usually 30 days) for violations of the general maintenance requirements, before a municipal summons and complaint may be issued.

The ordinance also contains local provisions to combat overcrowding. These are primarily conditions we observed during inspections, such as obvious living/sleeping arrangements in basements or attics, and other, less obvious signs such as exterior-style door locks on bedroom doors and/or the presence of multiple stoves or refrigerators in one dwelling unit. Similar to violations concerning vital facilities, we may issue a municipal summons and complaint in lieu of a notice of violation.

As you are aware, we were most recently involved in a sub-standard residential rental property enforcement action, culminating in substantial fines and restitution for temporary housing costs against a local landlord. In that particular case, we received a complaint regarding lack of heat and hot water facilities. According to our records, the last full inspection of the property was completed in May and June of 2013, and there is an outstanding notice of violation issued on December 17, 2013 pertaining to an exterior window frame problem. In performing our investigation, we determined that the natural gas for the hot water heater and the kitchen stove was turned off by PSE&G in October of 2013. There was no fuel oil in the tank for the furnace, and the furnace itself was malfunctioning. The landlord claimed no knowledge of these issues when he rented to a local family of 5 who moved into the property around April 1, 2014. Upon receiving a complaint from a concerned neighbor on April 8, 2014, we investigated and confirmed the conditions, and therefore issued a municipal summons and complaint on April 9; after the landlord failed to make emergency repairs, on April 15, 2014 we declared the home uninhabitable and provided the tenants with temporary housing and transportation. Subsequent to this action, the building underwent a full inspection which revealed other violations, as well as a possible structural issue. A referral to the construction department was made and the building has been deemed an unsafe structure by the Construction Official. In addition to the significant fines and restitution to the Municipality, the municipal judge ordered the landlord to correct all violations within 45 days.