

ENQUIRER

New list spotlights safer housing for UC students

New Year's Day tragedy prompts inspection effort

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Fire inspector Edwina Lyttle inspects a fire exit in the Vine Street Flats in Corryville near the University of Cincinnati.

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Ann Garner speaks before the first inspection as part of the city's new 'Safe Student Housing List.' Garner's daughter Ellen died in a house fire near the University of Cincinnati campus. / John Faherty /The Enquirer

Get inspectedThe Fire Prevention Bureau of the Cincinnati Fire Department can be reached by landlords for a free inspection by calling 513-357-7585. Student housing that passes will be put on the safe list.

Tuesday morning, Jong Woong Kim, a graduate student at the University of Cincinnati, opened the door of his apartment on Vine Street to a group of firefighters, politicians, grieving parents, his property manager and a gaggle of media.

They were there as part of a new effort by the city of Cincinnati to keep him safe from fire. His apartment was filled with thick books, healthy snacks and exercise equipment. In just about a minute, a firefighter checked Kim's smoke detectors, windows and doors and told him everything looked fine.

The creation of a "Safe Student Housing List" is the work of Councilwoman Laure Quinlivan. She wanted to do something after a fire Jan. 1 killed two UC students, Chad Kohls and Ellen Garner.

Quinlivan said the deaths were preventable. She said the home they were in did not have a safe way out from the third floor.

Based on the number of occupants in the building, it should have. The window in Kohls' room, she said, was blocked by an air conditioner.

Quinlivan's plan, completely voluntary, allows landlords to call the Cincinnati Fire Department for a free inspection. Once a home or apartment building passes, it will be placed on the safe list.

The list, which will be maintained by the city, will be available for anybody looking for an apartment. Tuesday's inspections were the first, so the list is not yet available.

Quinlivan said she did not want to penalize landlords, but rather give them an incentive. She believes students and their parents will want to find homes that are certified safe.

"The market has to drive it. People, landlords, have to want to get their property on the list," Quinlivan said.

Cincinnati Fire Chief Richard A. Braun was there.

"This is an opportunity to make our students and our citizens safer," Braun said. "It's near and dear to me because I have five grandchildren in college, three of whom are in off-campus housing."

The management of Vine Street Flats said that having a building known as safe is the right decision ethically and financially.

"As a business decision, it makes sense for us to put ourselves forward as a good, safe option," said Johnna Mullikin, vice president of property management with Uptown Rental Properties. "It's what people are looking for."

Student Jaclyn Hyde agreed. She said the New Year's Day fire that killed Kohls and Garner changed what students and their parents want in housing. Safety is now paramount. "After last semester's tragedy, that's what we are looking for now," said Hyde, an incoming senior.

UC has at least 4,000 students living in off-campus housing, according to Debra Merchant, vice president for Student Affairs & Services.

The school will provide a link to the city's list, as well as creating its own student-generated database. Merchant says the school's list will be a meeting place where students can describe their housing experiences.

When fire inspectors check a building, they will make sure it gets up to code, especially if it's already occupied.

When a building passes, and gets placed on the list, Braun will be required to provide tenants with a "TLC Addendum."

The tenant-landlord contract is "an agreement by the landlord to provide specific fire safety measures." The A-E-I-O-U list addresses alarms, exits, inspections, overcrowding and an understanding by tenants of their rights.

Ann Garner, the mother of Ellen Garner, said she never wanted her daughter's legacy to be fire safety.

"Here's the reality: Ellen had a passion for fashion. That is where she wanted to make her mark," she said.

"Unfortunately this is where God chose for her to make her mark."