

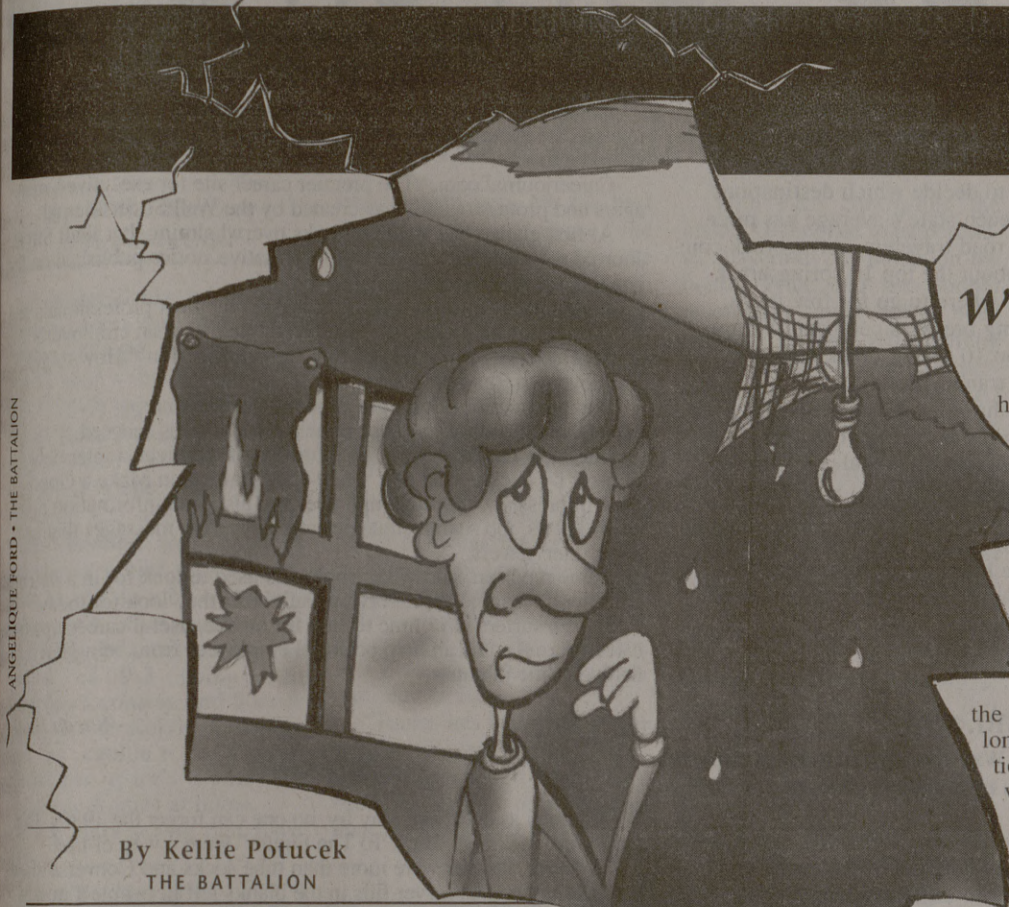
AGGIELIFE

THE BATTALION

Page 3 • Monday, March 3, 2003

Broken homes

Off-campus residents struggle with maintenance, landlord problems



By Kellie Potucek
THE BATTALION

When Colleen Roney and her roommates moved into their College Station apartment in August, they did not find the home-away-from-home they had expected.

"We were pretty disappointed with the condition of the apartment when we first got there. The place was filthy and there was a big hole in the bathroom ceiling where the vent should have been," said Roney, a junior accounting major.

Roney said she was driven to write letters of complaint to the main managerial office in Houston and to the local office before her requests were finally addressed by her apartment complex.

"It's ridiculous how you call the office everyday and they promise to get the job completed, but nothing is fixed," she said. "It was three months before that fan was finally replaced."

Leaky faucets, gaping holes, clogged dishwashers and pesky rodents are just a few of the many problems faced by students who live off campus. Home is supposed to be a place of refuge and comfort, but tenants are often plagued by inadequate living conditions compounded by unresponsive landlords. By signing a lease, renters agree to pay for their dwelling and the service necessary to maintain it. Unfortunately, some do not get what they pay for.

When Jonathan Graves returned from his honeymoon in August,

his apartment was hotter than it was outside. Graves said the College Station landlord responded quickly but inefficiently to his problem.

"The repairman rewired the air conditioner, mistakenly making it so the heater would run all the time instead," said Graves, a senior marketing and management double major.

After additional visits from the repairman, the heater was no longer a problem and the air conditioner was up and running. Then, winter came and Graves was in need of warmth.

"It turns out that the heater hadn't been a problem because they had disconnected it all together," Graves said.

The maintenance department sent repairmen out four times before finally hiring an A/C specialist who did the job correctly.

"We got our heater working just last week," he said.

Lucas Peterson, a senior psychology major, said the problems at his College Station fourplex are especially aggravating because his landlord lives in Houston.

Peterson said some of his troubles are loose shower knobs, a toilet that is rusted and consistently fails to flush and a leaky air conditioner that has flooded the hallway.

"Most of the time, I have to contact a repairman and then show the receipts to my landlord if I want a job done," he said. "Otherwise, my landlord comes and rigs whatever is broken so it will work for a week, and then it will break again."

Wendy Merkel, an assistant manager at a College Station apartment complex, said her establishment recently underwent a maintenance reform after residents were not satisfied with work order turnover rates.

"Since the change, work orders are knocked out every day,"

she said.

However, tenants who want exceptions from set rules are a regular problem, Merkel said. While most common requests are for early move-in dates or early breaks in leases, requirements are in place so that business can run smoothly, she said.

"This is a very mandated business that requires (management) to follow guidelines and red tape," she said.

So what can students do to expedite repair issues? The Texas Apartment Association's Web site, www.taa.org, answers renters' and landlords' questions. According to the site, one step to solve repair issues is derived from this simple rule of thumb: proof matters. Often students file grievances by calling their leasing office. While quick and convenient, this method offers no evidence that a complaint was ever filed. That is not to say students should not use their phone to initially make a complaint, but they should record the name of the person they spoke with and follow up with a letter. The site also recommends that renters sign and date the document and keep a copy on file.

TAA recommends that if the maintenance department says there will be a delay in service, renters should demand to know why. Tenants should also inquire about getting a specific date of completion promised, also in writing.

Risa Bierman, director of Adult, Graduate & Off-Campus Student Services, said student versus landlord conflicts are common issues addressed by her department. Many Bryan and College Station landlords use the standard TAA lease, which regulates that immediate action should be taken by the landlord in the case of an emergency, she said.

The lease defines an emergency as a problem that directly and immediately endangers the property, health or safety of the tenant. These problems include water leaks, electrical malfunctions and missing locks.

In most cases, a malfunctioning air conditioner does not qualify as an emergency. Likewise, mice and cockroaches, though irritating, do not generally pose immediate threats, Bierman said.

Bierman also said it is important to refer to one's lease and follow its proper procedure before jumping into legal actions.

For more information on legal options, students should contact Off-Campus Legal Services at 845-1741 or visit its Web site at www.studentlife.tamu.edu/ocss. The Web site offers draft letters of maintenance requests and lease termination notices. The service is free for currently enrolled students.

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