

# **Boston zeroes in on overcrowded student housing**

Will check 580 addresses, look for safety violations

By Todd Wallack Globe Staff January 02, 2015

Boston housing officials have identified roughly 580 potentially overcrowded student apartments across the city, based on a first-ever analysis of university data, and plan to dispatch inspectors to each address to look for possible safety violations in coming months.

The city recently obtained the addresses for tens of thousands of college students living off campus after a Globe Spotlight report last spring found widespread overcrowding and substandard living conditions in Boston's college neighborhoods. The Spotlight series found significant problems including rodents, broken windows, and malfunctioning smoke detectors.

Boston housing inspectors plan to confirm whether renters at the properties it flagged are actually violating a 2008 zoning rule barring more than four full-time undergraduate students from sharing the same apartment. They will also examine whether the units have unsafe living conditions, such as a lack of exits, that could pose an immediate hazard.

"For the first time, we have the data," said William Christopher, the architect who took over Boston's Inspectional Services Department last May. "It's a great beginning."

The city collected more than 25,000 addresses for students from 31 colleges. Using that list, city officials identified approximately 580 properties that appear to have five or more full-time undergraduate students living together in violation of city rules.

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"There is a possibility of a zoning violation there," said Christopher, explaining the process. "It's accurate enough for us to move forward."

City officials acknowledged the new information isn't perfect. Boston hasn't received addresses for every student. Many addresses it did obtain omitted unit numbers, making it difficult to tell whether some students in large buildings with multiple apartments were violating the occupancy limit rules.

Some universities may list a parent's address, where grades and tuition bills are sent, instead of the student's. And some addresses were repeated, listed in different formats, forcing city officials to spend three weeks cleaning up the data.

Even so, city officials believe the data will allow them for the first time to zero in on properties packed with the most students to try to identify overcrowding or potentially dangerous living conditions.

Boston University student Binland Lee died in Allston two years ago after a fire trapped her in an illegal attic apartment with only one way out, while another student was nearly killed in a separate fire on the same street three years ago.

If city officials confirm there are unsafe apartments or too many students living together in one unit, they said they plan to work with students, landlords and universities to find alternative housing for the occupants.

“We are not about hurting students here,” Christopher said, explaining that the city will only evict students as a last resort. “It is a cooperative approach.”

Boston officials also hope to use the off-campus student addresses to figure out whether any apartments are missing from the city’s new database of rental properties.

Starting in 2013, the city required landlords to register their properties with the city, laying the groundwork for regular inspections.

Ultimately, city officials hope to inspect all of Boston’s roughly 150,000 rental units over five years to make sure they comply with housing codes, but they are still finalizing the details on how to accomplish that task.

A local community activist praised the city’s efforts.

“The fact that they are really going to start visiting the properties that have the most students is a step in the right direction,” said Carol Ridge-Martinez, executive director of the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation.

Ridge-Martinez said the Walsh administration’s plans to visit every rental unit in the city will be even more important, though she called it “a huge task.”

Because of the limited amount of housing stock in Boston, landlords and tenants have long been tempted to carve up old buildings and pack in as many residents as possible, potentially creating unsafe conditions.

And many local schools haven’t built enough on-campus dorms to keep up with their surging enrollment, which has exacerbated the housing shortage.

The number of undergraduate and graduate students living off campus in the city soared 36 percent from 2006 to 2013, topping 45,000, the Globe found.

To afford the rent, many students have openly flouted city occupancy rules, while landlords have faced little pressure to maintain apartments because cash-starved students have few other options.

For years, some schools such as Boston College resisted providing specific addresses where students live, citing restrictions on releasing personal information about students.

After Lee's 2013 death in an overcrowded apartment, community activists called on local universities to release the addresses to help the city detect other unsafe units. Only Boston University initially complied.

But after the Globe spotlight series, Mayor Martin J. Walsh persuaded other schools in the city to provide the data as well.

Northeastern University spokesman Michael Armini said the school did not resist the request, but "simply needed to make sure that the submission did not conflict with federal laws on student privacy."

Boston has not yet collected data from every school. The city said it did not request data from two prominent public colleges, Bunker Hill Community College and Roxbury Community College, because they serve mostly part-time or nontraditional students.

But the city has collected the bulk of student addresses from private four-year colleges with a presence in Boston, including Boston College, BU, Harvard, Northeastern, and hopes to obtain data from the largest public university in Boston, University of Massachusetts Boston, in coming weeks.

The survey results from UMass Boston, which has several thousand students living off-campus in Boston, could help the city identify many more potentially overcrowded properties.

In addition, city officials say they have upgraded their computer systems to better keep track of problem landlords and track complaints.

They have also tried to share more information among departments and encouraged some of the biggest student landlords to do more to address complaints on their own.

"We have worked with some of the problem landlords and they have become much better," said Christopher, the Inspectional Services chief.

Separately, Northeastern University said it is still reviewing its relationship with Anwar Faisal, one of the city's most controversial student landlords, who has been the target of dozens of civil or criminal housing complaints over the past decade.

Northeastern has historically referred students to several landlords, including Faisal, on an internal website and leased buildings from Faisal's firm to use as dorms.

Armini said the university expects the review to be concluded in the spring, but downplayed the relationship.

He said Northeastern leases only 600 beds from Faisal's firm and other private property owners, compared to more than 8,000 traditional dorm beds it oversees on campus. In addition, Northeastern plans to open a new dorm with 720 more beds in a few weeks, he said.