

Crib Sheet

How to find your own place.

By Scott

When you've figured out what kind of apartment you want to move into, then it's time to start looking for one.

You may be eager to leave foster care before you have to, but don't rush it. Before you leave care, make sure you have a place to stay—and not just for a few nights. Living in foster care is a whole lot better than living in the streets or in Covenant House, or just kicking around from place to place. That makes it hard to get or keep a job, or to continue school.

When you are about two years away from leaving the foster care system or aging out, it's time to start thinking about how to find an apartment, where to look or what to look for. Here are 11 tips that can make looking for an apartment a little easier.

1. Plan Ahead. Find out from your social worker (or whoever in your agency can tell you) what benefits you can get when you leave foster care (like a housing voucher, income through SSI or special housing for former foster youth). Find out how old you have to be to receive these benefits. Get as much information as you can about options for when you leave care.

2. Plan Ahead. "Start figuring things out early," said Harriet Cohen, Director of Schafer Hall, a 91-unit residence for people with special needs and formerly in foster care. Even though some foster youth are eligible for housing vouchers, it's not a simple process to get the voucher and find a place. "Timing is one of the big things that can go wrong in an apartment search," Cohen said. "People don't apply for the housing voucher in time. It takes six months to a year to have it secure."

3. Know Your Options. One thing you're going to need to do is figure out where you want to live and what kind of apartment you want. You may want to live in your own studio apartment, or you might want to live with roommates. You might be planning to fall back on relatives. Find out now if that's realistic.

If you decide you want your own place, think about exactly what you're looking for in an apartment. Some people want to live in a quiet place, others want to be close to friends or family.

4. Save Money. You need a bank account with savings in it. When you finally do move into your apartment, you're not only going to need your first month's rent, you're also going to need a security deposit (which is usually one month's rent). That's money the landlord takes from you and holds onto in case you mess up the apartment in any way or leave without paying some of your rent. When you move out, the landlord should give

it back to you...unless you screw up. Sometimes landlords want a security deposit and the last month's rent, in advance. You need to be prepared.

5. Get References. Your landlord will need references—people s/he can talk to about how you'll be as a tenant. Basically, the landlord wants to know if you'll pay the rent on time and be a nice neighbor, that you won't have loud parties or damage the apartment. So you should ask someone—like a teacher, a staff member, a job supervisor or any adult that has been in your life—if you can use them as a reference. Make sure you have that person's number to give to the landlord so he or she can call.

6. Start Searching. Six or seven months before you're ready to leave the system is a good time to start looking for an apartment. To find a place, go to neighborhoods you want to live in and look for signs, and put up your own signs. (That's especially good if you're looking for a roommate.) Look in newspapers or online, like on Craig's List, and ask your agency about real estate agents, even though brokers can get expensive. ACS' office of housing policy and development (HPAD) should also have apartment listings. And ask everyone you know if they know of a place for rent.

Look for things like location. Is it close to the bus or train, your job or school, or a grocery store? If sunlight is important to you, look for a place that has a nice angle toward the sun. But you're not going to get all of these things so your best bet is to narrow down your priorities and look for what you need, not what you want. I would look for how close it is to work, the store and the post office.

7. Dress for Success. When meeting with a broker or apartment manager, act as if you're going on a job interview. Put on your most professional clothes, use your best speaking voice, be on time and have a positive attitude. Fill out apartment applications neatly. Have your ID and other information handy.

8. Ask Questions. Ask about anything you're unsure of or don't understand. For example, some places include heat and hot water in the rent, some don't. It can get pretty expensive to pay for those things, so make sure you ask whether they're included. If there's anything wrong with the apartment—like the lights or windows are broken—make sure they'll be repaired before you move in. Also, if you're moving to an unfamiliar neighborhood, ask people around there if it's safe, and try walking around after dark to see how you feel. You may want to bring someone with you to see the apartments or meet with a landlord, so you remember to ask your questions and have help thinking through your choices.

9. Read the Lease. Leases are not easy to understand. They're usually many pages long and have a lot of sections and clauses. Read the whole thing and make sure you understand all the rules before you sign it. Never sign anything unless you absolutely understand and agree to the terms.

If the lease says "no pets" and you get a cat, you can get kicked out. The best idea is to show the lease to an adult you trust—before you sign it. Once you sign the lease, you can't get your money back. So be careful.

10. Keep it Down. When the time comes for throwing yourself a housewarming party, invite your neighbors and landlord if it's appropriate. Don't let your guests disturb other tenants in the building, and be sure to end the party at a reasonable hour. Enjoy your freedom, but remember—you can be kicked out for disturbing your neighbors.

11. Did we say "plan ahead"?