

For WOU, the money is better spent elsewhere, Fuchs said.

"It doesn't make sense to put in forced air, heat or reroof, when honestly we could save that money and put it to a more permanent structure on our campus," she said.

She agreed that Campus Estates needs to be torn down. Other landlords aren't expected

to upgrade as quickly.

For example, there are the Wolf Pack Apartments not far from campus and managed by one of two large rental agencies operating in Monmouth, Rental Services Inc.

Soggy kitchens, bugs

Peluschenko discovered Joel Blount one day as he was cruising the Wolf Pack complex to let residents know about the tenants union.

"This is the worst place I've ever lived," the 21-year-old Blount said, recounting several months of unanswered complaints and major inconveniences.

"Just yesterday I walked into my apartment, and there was water all over the kitchen floor," he said. "For the first month we lived here, our power would shut off every day, like three times a day."

But Blount's worst complaint is something Rental Services officials say they can't repair: spiders.

"Seriously, these are the biggest house spiders I've ever seen in a house," the student said. "These things look like arantulas. At 1:30 in the morning, I spent a half-hour hunting one down. Finally, I chased it into the bathroom."

Like Campus Estates, the problem with Wolf Pack is age, said Veronica Nofziger, Rental Services property manager.

She oversees management of 100 units throughout the Willamette Valley, with about half of those rented by students.

"Like any management company, we're restricted to what the owner will allow," Nofziger said. "With Wolf Pack, we're working with the owners now to

try and turn things around and get some of these things taken care of."

Monmouth's union leaders say they will try the soft touch first. They don't plan any picketing soon.

The group has created a small brochure in which they give their goals of "organizing for tenant justice." They also outline the future with plans to provide

advocacy for tenants, establish a data bank of landlord complaints, investigate Oregon tenant laws and push for changes in the laws if necessary.

"We know people aren't doing this with the intent of slapping people in homes that are unsafe," said Kate Hoerauf, a tenants union member. "It's just an issue of not paying attention and letting things go."



DESTRUCTION:

Western Oregon University students (from left) Hilda Alvarez, Diana Ying and Eloina Cedillo lost all their belongings in October when fire destroyed their student housing apartment.

RON COOPER
Statesman Journal

Tenants unions struggle for support

Oregon is slowly waking up to the housing problems that renters face.

BY MARIE GRAVELLE
Statesman Journal

In Seattle, they forced a hospital to stop burning medical waste in a neighborhood.

In San Francisco, they saved an 83-year-old woman from eviction.

In Massachusetts, they lost a battle over rent control but continue to wage war against landlords.

They are tenants unions, the most grass roots of all organizations. Beginning in the East in the early 1970s, tenant groups fought long and hard against rising rents in places such as Boston and New York.

They moved slowly west, showing up in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

But like most unions today, many tenants unions have a tough time recruiting members. Numbers have dwindled and

huge issues, such as rent control, are being lost in major cities.

Portland had a tenants union, but it fizzled to be replaced in 1996 by a community alliance. The most recent local union incarnation popped up last year in Monmouth near Western Oregon University.

In both places, organizers have the drive but little support. Their only hope may be if housing problems get worse.

Portland's Community Alliance of Tenants, which isn't a union but an organization, operates a renter's hot line and help office.

In three years of operation, the Alliance has received more than 5,000 hot line calls. Director Dana Brown has a long list of horror stories.

"We had a tenant call who just moved into an apartment in Portland. He noticed the countertop in the kitchen was not sealed down. He pulled it up and found a host of maggots," Brown said. "The landlord's response was to just nail it down."

Other stories involve rats, ten-

ants who fall through flooring, banisters that fall off and even cursing landlords.

Evictions are also too common in Oregon, Brown said. Landlords can legally force a tenant to move out with only 30 days notice and no stated reason.

"Often there is no reason to send people to a lawyer because they have no cause of action," she said.

While the Alliance struggles to organize tenants and the Monmouth Independence Tenants Union struggles to become known, organizers say Oregon is beginning to wake up to serious housing problems.

"There is a greater need for tenant organizing now because of the hot housing market that exists in many parts of Oregon," Brown said. Even in tiny Monmouth, the annual influx of college students has created a tight market.

"Landlords can find renters who need low-cost housing very easily," she said, "and (especially in the case of students) they're easy to replace."

Students form tenants union

Statesman Journal

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WOU students who are angry with living conditions plan to fight for repairs.

BY MARIE GRAVELLE
Statesman Journal

MONMOUTH — Eloina Cedillo doesn't know why she woke up at 2 a.m. that Sunday. She's just glad she did.

"I could see the red fire, the color of it, underneath the bed. That's when I got out," the 19-year-old Western Oregon University student said.

Cedillo grabbed a fire extinguisher. It didn't work.

"As soon as I got back to the room, it went up in flames," she said. That's

when the smoke alarm in the hallway finally went off.

Cedillo and her two roommates, who weren't home at the time, lost all of their belongings in the Oct. 17 blaze.

"If I didn't get up, I wouldn't be here," she said. "That's the thing that scares me."

It scares Robert

Woolsey, too. In fact, student living conditions upset him so much last year that he and a handful of students started a tenants union — the first of its kind in this area.

The Monmouth Independence Tenants Union hopes to convince landlords to keep up on maintenance and encourage students to complain.

"We want to give not just students, but everybody who rents in the Monmouth/Independence area, a voice," said Eric Peluschenko, Woolsey's roommate.

The outrage started last year, when Woolsey lived in that same room at Campus Estates, a group of older apartments on the WOU campus in Monmouth.

"When I heard about the fire it was like a big 'I told you so,'" Woolsey said.

Where to call

Renters can call the Renter's Rights Hotline, based in Portland, to find out about Oregon housing laws. The hot line is (503) 288-0130 and is run by the Community Alliance of Tenants.

To contact the Monmouth Independence Tenants Union, call (503) 606-0619 or e-mail M_I_T_U_@hotmail.com.

The education major and his roommate said they complained last year to university housing officials about electrical problems, mold, stoves that didn't work, dangerous wall heaters and smoke alarms that either fell off the ceiling or didn't exist in the bedrooms.

"They didn't listen," Peluschenko said.

In the recent fire, Cedillo's comforter caught fire when it touched a baseboard heater.

Tina Fuchs, director of university residences, pointed out that the fire was not caused by faulty wiring or anything wrong with the facility.

"It had to do with having things a little too close to the heater," Fuchs said. "I wouldn't house people there if they were hazardous."

Conditions cramped

Students say, however, that the older wall and baseboard heaters take up so much room in the small apartments that it's impossible to keep furniture away. And the danger was heightened last month by the fact there was no smoke detector in the bedroom.

While Peluschenko lived at Campus Estates, he had a small fire. A towel hanging on a bathroom rack scorched after touching a heater.

"The rack was right in front of a heater," he said.

Because of student complaints and a need for new classroom space, the apartments are scheduled for demolition within the next few years.

Many students don't put up a fuss at Campus Estates because they think it's a good deal, Peluschenko said. Rent is about \$180 to \$190 a month per student to share a room in a two- or three-bedroom apartment. That includes all utilities and phone lines. And it's furnished.

"Just because it's cheap doesn't mean it should be unsafe," Peluschenko said.

Not that cheap

The rooms are very small, and the building is old. Despite that, one apartment rents for more than \$700.

The students decided to show off the high cost of housing and lack of repairs in some apartment complexes on and off campus by writing to the Western Star, the WOU school newspaper.

They wrote columns last term called "Dump of the Week," profiling various complexes. But the newspaper staff got enough complaints from advertisers that they began requiring union members to pay an advertising rate for their columns. That forced an end to the columns.

But that won't force an end to the union, students say. Housing is an issue that hits home with many college students. Some are saddled with high rent, broken appliances and big deposits, situations others would never accept.

"Wherever you get a campus community you get these student slums," noted Peter Callero, WOU sociology professor. "My first experience with cockroaches was in college."

As Callero noted, "it's easy to exploit the kids." Sometimes this is their first home away from home. They don't know their rights. And because students are temporary tenants, landlords have no incentive to keep them happy or make expensive repairs.