

Setting Yourself Up for Success: Securing Housing While on The Registry.

A lot has changed since the pandemic in 2020. Unfortunately, housing is now generally more difficult to find and more expensive. People with sex offenses on their records find themselves particularly challenged, as they are often forced to choose between substandard housing, remaining in halfway houses, or even homelessness.

As difficult and daunting as moving is, there are some things that you can do to increase your chances of success. This advice has been gathered from my personal experience with finding a home after being released from prison and also from conversations I've had with many former offenders over the years.

This article is tailored to those people who are on sex offense registries or have convictions for sex offenses, but I believe that these tips are useful for anyone looking to relocate.

An Uphill Climb

Let's face it: if you have a sex offense on your record or are listed on a sex offense registry, you are at a severe disadvantage from other applicants. This becomes especially relevant nowadays as housing is in such high demand and you may be competing with many other potential tenants, almost all of whom will not have your record.

It is not enough to simply submit your application and hope for the best. This was not and adequate strategy before the pandemic, and it is certainly not enough now. A landlord or property owner will likely have plenty of other people to choose from and a sex offense on your record is an easy reason for them to toss you into the "NO" pile.

Even if you secure a property without ever having a background check performed or the details of your past coming up, it is vital that you share with the property owner your circumstances. Being up front early on will prevent the possible devastation down the road of having your lease revoked or renewal denied based on your criminal record. The way I see it, you absolutely need to be honest with a landlord.

You are not your offense

How can you get around a label that has been placed on you? You have to personalize yourself.

You have to demonstrate that you are not one-dimensional. You are not "a felon" or "a sex offender". You are a learner, a survivor, a mentor, a parent, a brother, and a part of your community. What have you learned about yourself since your sentence? What do you want to lead with?

Ideally, you begin this process of shedding your label and humanizing yourself with a face-to-face meeting and tour of the property. Do all that you can to secure an in-

person tour with the landlord, even if that means getting creative as to why you need to see the place in-person as opposed to going off of the photos online (for example: you have trouble with stairs and you need to see how steep they are, or you want to see if there's clearance to move in your couch, or you have sensitive allergies and want to see if your sneezing acts up).

Meeting the landlord face to face sets the baseline. This means that their primary impression of you is of a human being and a smiling face, not a name on paper or a label of "sex offender". Ideally, you are relaxed and your personality shows during this meeting and the landlord has a great first impression. Maybe you made them laugh or you have a good smile or handshake. Maybe you told them a story and demonstrated that you have a good work ethic, cleaning habits, and respect for taking care of a home. You have presented yourself as "conscientious, polite, transparent renter" instead of "John Smith who has a criminal record".

I would *not* share the details of your conviction at this first meeting. You want to form an impression of YOU as a worthy and respectable individual. You do not want to include "felon" or "sex offender" with your first impression.

Remember, you are not these labels! You are a person who committed a sex offense or someone who has a sex offense conviction, but foremost you are a human being. All people are created equal, and you deserve just as much regard and opportunity as the next person.

Independent landlords vs corporations

The dynamic is different with a company or corporation compared to an independent mom-and-pop landlord. Housing developments are more likely to have set-in-stone policies on renting to people with violent felonies or sex offenses (or other issues like low credit scores or poor rental history). You are less likely to have luck with these outfits. Before applying, you might consider anonymously calling the main office and inquiring whether or not having a felony or a sex offense bars you from living in their units.

Small landlords, like small employers, are not bound by set policies and will be more likely to consider applicants on a case-by-case basis. I recommend finding these independent landlords and focusing your search here.

Properties owned by small, non-corporate landlords are less likely to be on the major websites like apartments.com/ or zillow.com/. You may have more luck finding them on Craig's List or by physical signs ("For Rent") posted in front of the property or in a window.

Still in Custody?

This meeting is much more difficult or impossible if you are still in prison. I empathize with you and I know that there are serious hurdles (and sometimes walls) set up in between prison and getting back to a normal life. You must persevere and keep moving forward. Never quit.

I suggest you find your way to a halfway house so that you can better search in a neighborhood that makes sense for you. As with all aspects of getting back on your

feet, I urge you to reach out to organizations inside and outside of the corrections system and ask for help. Keep asking until you find someone who can assist you.

Your ticket to your new home

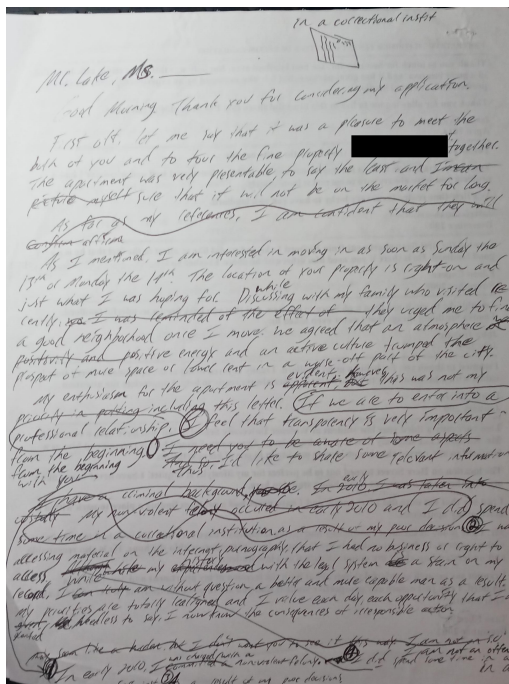
We want to distance your criminal history from the idea of you as a human being. We also want to separate you from the rest of the applicants trying to move in. After you have done your best to meet face-to-face and formed an impression, your next step is a personalized follow-up letter.

This is your chance to seal the deal and help this person understand you and what has brought you to this point in your life. This letter will answer the question “Why should I rent to you when you’ve just admitted that you have a sex offense on your record?”

This letter should demonstrate that you are

- a good communicator
- willing to own your mistakes
- invested in bettering yourself and living a different life
- honest
- more than just a label
- eager to move in ASAP

If you can't write well, ask for help. Use my example below as a guide.



An advantage of this method is that it allows you to present information to a landlord in a deliberate and controlled manner. You can work out exactly what you want to say, cover all your points, avoid saying too much, and manage the tone of the information. You also allow the reader to digest this information at their own pace.

Contrast this with a face-to-face disclosure. In the moment, you may find yourself nervous and embarrassed. You may say things that you didn't want to say, or you may say them in a way that you didn't want to. You may forget important details about how you've changed or what kind of life you want to lead now, post-prison. You run a risk of overwhelming the listener with information, and they may focus on the negatives and fail to take in your positive qualities.

You only get once chance to make a first impression. This applies just as much to your disclosure of your criminal history.

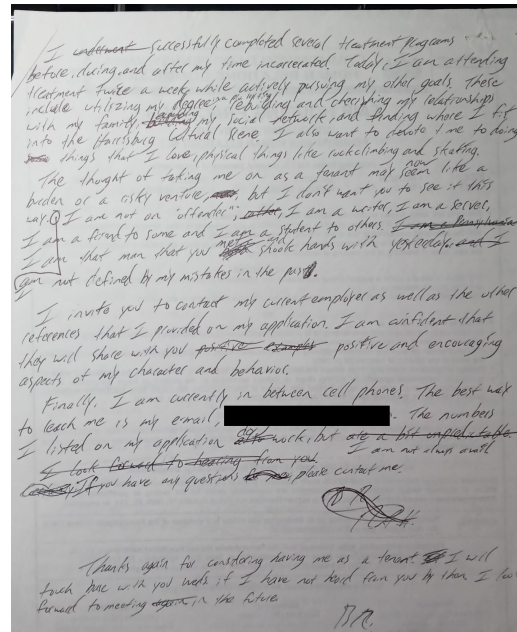
The important parts of this letter that you will want to touch on include:

- a thank-you for the landlord's time
- what you liked about the space and how it would fit your needs
- recognition that being honest is important to you
- a brief & broad description of your conviction
 - an acceptance of your own role in it
- what consequences you paid for your crime
- what you have done to change
- your goals and dreams for your new life
- acknowledgement that your label ("sex offender") seems risky
 - your reasons why you are not a risk
- your references and the relationships that you value
- a thank-you for landlord's consideration and how you plan to follow-up

If you are able to meet your landlord face-to-face and you follow up with a sincere letter as I have outlined, I believe that you will have at least leveled the playing field between you and the other applicants. At most, you will have stood out and risen above the rest because you have shown that you are transparent, trustworthy, and assertive.

You deserve a clean, safe, and enriching place to live. Many people with the same challenges you face have come before you and found fun, fulfilling lives after release from prison. You can accomplish this, too.

I wish you the best in your journey and I encourage you to stay positive and optimistic for brighter days ahead. You can do it.



Transcript of my letter to my landlord, July 2014

Mr. Lake,

Good morning. Thank you for considering my application.

First off, let me say that it was a pleasure to meet you and to tour the fine property at 123 Main St. together. The apartment was very presentable, to say the least, and I'm sure that it won't be on the market for long.

As I mentioned, I am interested in moving in as soon as Sunday the 13th or Monday the 14th. The location of your property is right-on and just what I was hoping for. While discussing with my family who visited recently, they urged me to find a good neighborhood once I move. We agreed that an atmosphere with positive energy and an active culture trumped the prospect of more space or lower rent in a worse-off part of the city.

My enthusiasm for the apartment is evident. However, this was not my priority in including this letter. If we are to enter into a professional relationship, I feel that transparency is very important from the beginning. Thus, I'd like to share some relevant information with you.

In early 2010, I was charged with a non-violent felony. I was accessing material on the internet, pornography, that I had no business or right to access. As a result of my poor decisions, I did spend some time in a correctional institution.

While my history with the legal system is a stain on my record, I am without question a better and more capable man as a result of my experiences. My priorities are totally realigned and I value each day, each opportunity that I am granted. Needless to say, I now know the consequences of irresponsible action.

I successfully completed several treatment programs before, during, and after my time incarcerated. Today, I am attending treatment twice a week while actively pursuing other goals. These include utilizing my degree in a professional setting, rebuilding and cherishing my relationships with my family, expanding my social network, and finding where I fit into the Harrisburg cultural scene. I also want to devote time to doing things that I love, physical things like rock climbing and skating.

The thought of taking me on as a tenant may now seem like a burden or a risky venture, but I don't want you to see it this way. I am not defined by my mistakes in the past. I am not "an offender"; I am a writer, I am a server, I am a friend to some and I am a student to others. I am the man that you met and shook hands with yesterday.

I invite you to contact my current employer as well as the other references that I provided on my application. I am confident that they will share with you positive and encouraging aspects of my character and behavior.

Finally, I am currently in between cell phones. The best way to reach me is my email, name@place.com. The numbers I listed on my application do work, but I am not always available. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Thank you again for considering having me as a tenant. I will touch base with you Wednesday if I have not heard from you by then. I look forward to meeting in the future.

Best Regards,