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2 years after law enacted, thousands of Boston apartments still unregistered

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 18, 2015

Nearly a third of apartments in Boston are still not registered with the city, two years after it became mandatory under a law enacted amid rising concern over substandard conditions at some rental properties.

“We’ve really been working hard on this for two years, and we’ve made progress,” said William Christopher, head of the Inspectional Services Department, which oversees the registration system. “Do we have more of a ways to go? We certainly do.”

The initial deadline to register units was Aug. 1, 2013, but after a slow start, the city extended that by a month. Landlords are required to reregister their units by the beginning of July each year.

A database provided by the city shows that 111,467 units were registered as of Sept. 3. But there are about 164,000 renter-occupied units in Boston based on 2013 figures from the Census Bureau, meaning that more than 50,000 units are not being tracked by the city.

The number of registered units may be even lower. Christopher said the rental registration database

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may contain some duplicate entries that have to be weeded out. A Globe review of the data turned up about 2,500 units that appeared to be listed more than once.

Gregory Vasil, chief executive of the Greater Boston Real Estate Board, which represents property owners and developers, said he believes many landlords have not registered because “a lot of people have no idea” the rule exists.

Christopher said his office was continuing to try to educate landlords about the law, including by holding monthly informational meetings and enclosing reminders in water and sewer bills.

Some landlords have also found the online registration process to be cumbersome and complicated, and an effort is underway to simplify it, Christopher said.

Even though not everyone is signed up, Christopher said, his workers have noticed improved housing conditions across the city. He credited the registration program as a key factor.

“We think it’s a good system and it’s going in the right direction,” he said.

The city ordinance requires all privately owned dwellings not occupied by the property owner to be registered.

Landlords register either electronically or via paper forms with the Housing Division of the Inspectional Services Department. They must provide contact information, the number of units they own, and the units’ addresses.

The landlords must also agree to abide by all laws.

Christopher said that prior to the creation of the database, the process of identifying some landlords and finding contact information for them was time-consuming and prevented city officials from issuing violations or pursuing legal action over apartments that did not comply with housing regulations.

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Some property owners have decried the law, opposing the fees and the time it takes to sign up. They have also said the registration unfairly burdens responsible and smaller landlords.

“We are getting much better information about who owns these units, where they are, and how many units they own,” he said. “And if we have a landlord who is a problem, we now have a name and address of someone we can serve a violation to.”

Activists have called on the city to take stronger steps to ensure that apartments meet housing and safety regulations following a [Globe Spotlight investigation](#) in the spring of 2014 that detailed a host of poor, dangerous conditions at some off-campus units in the city’s college neighborhoods.

It costs \$25 per unit to register for the first time and \$15 per unit to renew the registration each year. Fees are capped at \$2,500 per building and \$5,000 per complex.

Some property owners have [decried](#) the law, opposing the fees and the time it takes to sign up. They have also said the registration unfairly burdens responsible and smaller landlords.

Last year the city passed an amendment to the ordinance that waived registration fees for rental units in owner-occupied buildings with six or fewer rental units and called for the city to refund fees already paid for such exempt units.

So far, roughly 16,000 landlords have registered one or more units, paying a combined \$2.9 million in registration fees.

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