

New Roots in Common Ground Discussion and Activity Guide

New Roots in Common Ground is an hour long DVD covering some of the most integral points with which refugees and other immigrants should be familiar when dealing with housing in the United States. The DVD is not designed as a stand-alone piece. For optimum orientation, screening of the DVD should occur in conjunction with distribution of Mercy Housing's orientation booklet, "Welcome to Your New Home..." and should be part of a more extensive housing orientation program.

We have found that new arrivals are often overwhelmed by the amount of information provided to them in the first few weeks in the country, and they may benefit from reviewing this DVD again several months after arriving.

Mercy Housing's Refugee Housing Program has designed this discussion and activity guide in order to promote conversation, understanding and engagement around the points presented in the DVD.

This guide is broken up into chapters. Each chapter includes:

- **Key Points:** The most basic points to be derived from each chapter; ideal to cover with new arrivals
- **Study Questions:** Questions designed to help refugees evaluate the information provided in the DVD and augment it with their own ideas. These questions can be worked through individually or in a group. Questions marked with a 🌀 are "icebreakers," developed to encourage refugees to talk about what they already know about housing and their own experiences.
- **"Going Deeper":** These activities are designed for new arrivals and longer-term refugees who are advanced in their understanding of housing in the United States. Designed to promote greater study and engagement in each chapter's issue, these tasks require independent work from refugees outside of an organizational setting.

Please note that this study guide is a living document. If you have any suggestions, additions or comments about this, please contact us at refugeehouseinfo@mercyhousing.org. Additional copies of this guide can be downloaded from our website at www.refugeehouse.org.

Chapter One: Renting Housing in the United States

Key Points:

- There are different kinds of housing in the United States, but most refugees will initially rent an apartment.
- To rent an apartment, you must fill out an application. Landlords also often run background checks.

-When renting or leasing an apartment, you will have to sign a lease. The lease outlines the details of the agreement between the renter and the property owner, including when and how much rent should be paid, what utilities are included in rent and the length of the lease.

-Before moving out, tenants must complete the term of their lease and provide their landlord with written notice that they are moving. Failure to do this may result in loss of security deposits and extra charges.

Study Questions:

✪ What is different from housing where you came from? What is similar?

✪ What kind of housing do you have now?

Where can you find information about available rental apartments?

What information is included in background and credit checks?

What information is in a lease?

If you don't understand a lease, what should you do?

What should you do if you see damage in your new apartment?

Going deeper...

- Tenant rights and responsibilities vary from location to location. Many organizations specialize in educating renters about their rights and mediating in conflicts between landlords and tenants. Find out which organizations in your city or state provide this service.
- The Department of Homeland Security requires every immigrant and refugee household to complete an official change of address form within 30 days of moving. Ask for a change of address form at your local post office and review it for when you do move.

Chapter Two: Paying Bills

Key Points:

-It is very important to pay all the bills for which you are responsible. If you don't, you may not be able to rent an apartment in the future and will find it difficult to make large purchases—such as a car.

-To reduce the amount of money you pay on bills, pay on time to avoid late charges and conserve energy in your household.

Study Questions:

✪ What utilities do you have to pay separately from your rent?

✪ What can you do to remember to pay your bills on time?

If you do not understand the information on a bill, what should you do?

If you know that you cannot pay a bill on time, what should you do?

What can happen if you do not pay your bills on time?

Why do you want to keep your thermostat in the range suggested in the DVD?

Going Deeper...

- Many utility companies and cities have an emergency bill payment assistance program to help families make their utility payments in times of hardship. Contact your local government and utility company to find out if a program like this exists in your area.

Chapter Three: Mail and Notices

Key Points:

-Landlords post notices on tenants' doors when they have important information to convey about lease violations, community events and other announcements.

-Notices from property management should not be ignored. Contact your manager immediately if you receive a notice.

-Mail should be sorted and disposed of securely in your apartment.

Study Questions:

-✪ Who do you know to help you sort your mail?

-Why is it important to protect your identity by disposing of mail properly?

-What should you do if you get a written notice/verbal warning about nonpayment of rent or other action that can result in your eviction?

-What happens to your belongings if you are evicted? Where would you stay if you were evicted?

Going Deeper:

- The process of eviction differs from state to state. Find out what the process is in your area— and how to prevent evictions— by meeting with organizations specializing in tenant rights and mediation. (See chapter one)

Chapter Four: Cleaning and Maintaining your Apartment

Key Points:

-Cleaning your apartment regularly can help your furniture last, keeps pests away, can reduce your maintenance costs and helps ensure the return of your security deposit.

-As part of the lease agreement, landlords expect tenants to keep their apartments clean and help maintain common areas such as lobbies and laundry rooms.

Study Questions:

♻️ Where does trash go at your apartment complex?

♻️ Does your apartment have a laundry room? What other common areas are there where you live?

Why is it important to clean your apartment regularly?

Going Deeper:

- There are a large number of different brands and types of household cleaners in the United States. Learn about inexpensive “green” cleansers (see “At Home with Refugee Housing” appendix 17 under “publications” at www.refugeehouse.org) or organize a trip to the grocery store and a cleanser demonstration to find the safest, most inexpensive cleansing options for your apartment.

Chapter Five: Keeping Pests and Bugs Away

Key Points:

-Roaches and other pests can cause disease and can damage entire apartment buildings.

-To prevent pest infestations, keep food properly stored, clean regularly—especially in the kitchen—and pick up piles of laundry from the floor.

-If you do have pest problems, contact your landlord immediately and properly prepare for extermination.

Study Questions:

♻️ What pests/bugs were a problem where you were before you came to the US?

Why are roaches a problem?

What should you do to prepare for extermination in your apartment?

What are signs of bedbugs? How can you prevent bedbug infestations?

Going Deeper:

- Learn more about the troubles of bedbugs by going to the Refugee Housing Program’s Bed Bug Factsheet in “Publications” at www.refugeehouse.org.

Chapter 6: Repairs

Key Points:

- Property management usually makes repairs to apartments; if tenants cause the damages, they may have to pay to have the repair made.
- Report all needed repairs immediately. Failure to report repairs promptly can result in more extensive and more expensive damages.

Study Questions:

🌐 Who fixed houses/apartments where you were before you came to the US? How is the US system different?

What can you do if a manager does not make a repair that you have requested?

What can you do if you don’t speak English and you need to report a problem?

Going Deeper:

- Download the Refugee Housing Program’s “Please Repair” form in your language and have it in your apartment to use the next time you need to request a repair. Help out your neighbors and your landlord by introducing them to the forms, too.

Chapter 7: Safety in Your Home

Key Points:

- Be aware of the potential dangers that exist in and around your home, including fire and electrocution hazards, poisonous chemicals, and crime.
- Keep household items such as cleaning supplies and medicines out of reach of children to prevent poisoning.
- Keep your doors locked and do not allow people you do not know into your apartment building.
- Don’t be afraid to call 9-1-1 in case of an emergency.

Study Questions:

🌐 What dangers are there that may exist in your home but were not mentioned in the DVD?

What household items in your home should be kept out of reach of children? How can you secure these items to be sure children cannot access them?

What can you do to protect your child from electric shocks?

How can you protect your child from lead poisoning?

What should you do if your child is poisoned?

What does a smoke alarm do?

Who replaces the battery in your smoke detector? How often is it replaced?

What should you do if you burn food?

What can you do to keep your apartment secure?

If someone you don't know wants to come into your apartment building, what should you do?

When should you call 9-1-1? If you have a problem you think the police should know about, but it is not a life-threatening emergency, what should you do?

What information will be asked when you call 9-1-1?

Going Deeper:

- Sometimes, people don't think about planning for a fire emergency until a fire is already burning. Test the battery in your smoke detectors with the help of your manager or with someone else who is knowledgeable about your alarm system. Your alarm may "chirp" if the battery needs to be replaced. Get to know your smoke alarm and the different sounds it makes. Also, know the best way to get out of your apartment if a fire does occur. Ask your manager if the property conducts regular fire drills.

Chapter 8: Being a Good Neighbor

Key Points:

-Being a good neighbor means interacting with others in your neighborhood and respecting the rights of those around you.

Study Questions:

🗣️ How did neighbors interact where you came from?

What can you do to be a good neighbor in the United States?

-If your neighbors are being loud late at night, are cooking food that has an offensive odor or are otherwise disturbing you, what should you do? If you were disturbing your neighbors and didn't know it, how would you like your neighbors to tell you about the problem?

Going Deeper:

- One man in the DVD talks about the responsibility of refugees to introduce themselves to their neighbors. Think about ways that you can introduce yourself to your neighbors. If you are shy or nervous, you may be able to work with your landlord to organize a neighborhood potluck meal or other event where neighbors can get to know each other.

Chapter 9: Communication

Key Points:

-Communication with landlords and neighbors is one of the biggest challenges and one of the most important skills refugees must acquire to succeed in housing in the U.S.

-If you do not speak English fluently, you can still communicate important points by gesturing, using picture dictionaries and other nonverbal communication approaches.

-Many people can help you communicate about housing.

Study Questions:

🗣️ Who do you know who can help you with housing challenges you may face (e.g. clergy, imams, ESL teachers)?

If you have a housing problem, and you don't know English well, what should you do?

Going Deeper:

- What do you think the ten most important phrases in addressing housing challenges are? Write these down in your language and work with ESL teachers to learn how to say these phrases in English. If you are already fluent, help someone in your local or ethnic community practice.