

# Questions about Space Heaters and Safe Heating

## Space Heaters

Every year we get questions from both landlords and tenants on space heaters.

1. Can they use space heaters?
2. What about this type of heater?

Each time our answer must reflect what it says in the City's Housing Ordinance as noted below, "Unvented room heaters that burn gas, oil, kerosene or operate by electricity are unacceptable."

Also many times when we inspect we find space heaters:

1. Sitting under curtains
2. Placed on or around papers and other combustibles.
3. Some tenants even lay clothes on them to dry them out.
4. We have also found them with over-heated cords and even plugged into extension cords.

All of which can cause a fire.

**As we said earlier, the housing inspector will fail the space heater if found inside a rental.**

## Some Examples of Space Heaters Below



**Did you know that according to one source, Consumer Reports, space heaters cause around 1700 house fires and 70 deaths each year?**

## Safe Heating

There should be no need for space heaters if the building/apartment's heating plant is working properly. Every year we get questions about what to do if a tenant has no heat.

In the City of Marshalltown's Housing Ordinance, it states there must be safe heating from September 15<sup>th</sup> to June 15<sup>th</sup> if owner supplies heat. However the code also states safe heating facilities are required in all habitable rooms and the minimum temperature should be 68° three feet above the floor and five feet away from any exterior wall. So, if there is no heat, we will contact the landlord immediately. If the problem cannot be fixed the same day, it is the owner's responsibility to ensure that each tenant has safe housing until the matter is properly corrected.

To avoid these incidents, our office during each municipal rental inspection, require all furnaces 5 years or older be inspected by a licensed heating contractor to ensure the furnace is working properly and safely. Boilers should be inspected yearly. Remember only a licensed heating contractor can work on furnaces. Only licensed hydronics workers can work on boilers.

However, there are some things we recommend you can do to ensure your furnaces are working properly such as:

1. Have your heating plant regularly serviced by your licensed heating contractor.
2. Change filters regularly.
3. Do not allow storage within 3 feet of the furnace (or water heater for that matter).
4. Are the ducts from the furnace to the rooms intact with no holes or gaps? Have they become unhooked?

5. Have the tenants placed furniture, clothing or any item on top of the heat vents or even the cold air returns?

There can be other causes for too cold of home/apartment.

1. Are the doors & windows to the exterior sealing properly?
2. Are the doors & windows deteriorating?
3. Siding, roof, foundation and building trim work with holes, gaps and other deterioration can cause not only weather infiltration but pest infiltration as well as breaking down the substructure components.

Any of these suggestions can help you and your tenants to avoid heating problems so they do not need space heaters.

More importantly, talk with your HVAC contractor or hydronics worker; they are your source on making sure your heating plant is working properly and safely.

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**Some applicable sections of the City of Marshalltown's Housing Ordinance, Chapter 15.5, Sec. 15.5-26. Housing Quality Standards:**

(d) *Thermal environment.* (1)

*Performance requirement.* The dwelling unit shall have and be capable of maintaining a thermal environment healthy for the human body. (2)

*Acceptability criteria.* The dwelling unit shall contain safe heating facilities that are in proper operating condition and can provide adequate heat to each room in the dwelling unit appropriate for the climate to assure a health living environment. Unvented room heaters that burn gas, oil, kerosene or operate by electricity are unacceptable.

Sec. 15.5-41. Plumbing facilities. (e) Safe heating facilities capable of heating all habitable rooms, bathrooms, and water closet to compartments to at least 68 degrees Fahrenheit (20 degrees Celsius) at a distance three feet above the floor

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