

My experience with a mold problem at 219 Melrose Court, a house owned by the University of Iowa and managed by Heritage Property Management.

In October '07, I rented a UI-owned house through a private property management service.

The UI had just purchase the house and I was its first occupant. It needed serious repairs (windows falling off, clogged gutters, poor drainage, etc.) but I was assured that these things would be taken care of.

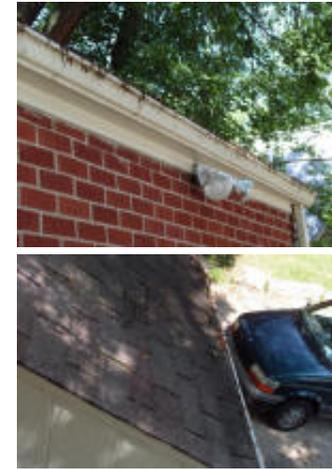
After less than a month in the house I experienced water in the finished basement and a mold smell. I complained to the property management folks and nothing was done. I reported that the gutters were clogged (some 80% covered by poorly installed roofing) and that water was pouring directly from the roof into the foundation.

As months went on, I learned that maintenance of the house was piecemeal and low quality. (Some windows were replaced, the workmanship was shoddy, no one from the UI or the property management inspected the job, it was left to me to call and complain about the outcomes, etc.)

And the mold problem grew worse, as did the water in the basement. The clogged gutters and poor drainage were not addressed.

In the early spring I decided not to renew my lease because of the poor property management.

Then the rains came and the basement filled with water constantly. My son (who



The near constant stream of water through the basement foundation was in part fed by poorly installed and maintained gutters. Note how roofing material covers most of the gutter guard -- which staff from the UI Business Office tried to convince me was a new popular technique. (Click to enlarge)



Mold takes over while I'm traveling. I'm advised by experts to leave it alone because of my allergies. (Click to enlarge)

used the basement as a practice space for his band) gave up on the space, tiring of carrying his equipment outside to dry after every rain. I wrote emails, made phone calls, all to no avail.

I probably cleaned water out of the basement 20 times, but I travel for weeks and a time and could not keep up with the flow. After awhile I could not stand to go into the basement because of the mold and smell.

By now the mold had taken over the house. I could clean a toilet bowl on the second floor and it would have a mold ring inside the bowl within five days. I found mold growing on my African artwork and musical instruments. Visible molds of several varieties covered 30-50 square feet of my basement wall and covered the woodwork near the floor.

When the summer weather hit, I tried using the AC, but it filled the house with an obnoxious smell that made me woozy.

All of this time I was feeling quite ill, suffering headaches, depressive thoughts, and bouts of total exhaustion. I attributed this to my recent separation and hectic work schedule. Then, mid-summer, while helping a friend whose house had been flooded, I was given a brochure on mold's effects on health and was surprised to find I had virtually every symptom. (Including fingernails that had grown misshapen and ugly.)

I started noting when I was feeling symptoms and realized that when I traveled on business I was free of depressive thoughts and headaches, but they returned when I got home.

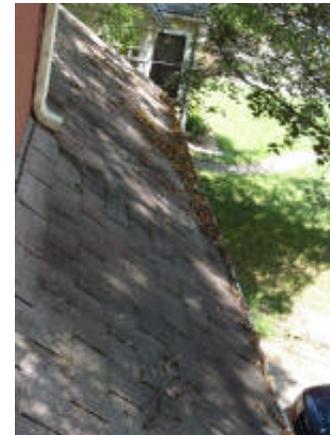
I visited the allergist who has treated me for 15 years and discovered I had a new mold allergy.

I spent as much time as possible away from my house in the last month of my lease. I pressed the business office to clean up the house and deal with the mold issues, but they denied the problem (not visiting to see the mold growth until a few days before the end of the lease.)

Consulting with mold experts, I learned that it would be unwise to move my spore-ridden possessions into another house given my allergic state. I read from



Before the painter showed up to cover the stuff, I estimated over 50 square feet of the basement walls were covered with black and grey molds. (Click to enlarge)



Picture taken July 28 after UI Business Office claims "The gutters were all cleaned out ... Our next step is to place gutter guard on to help keep debris out." Note clogged gutters AND pre-existing gutter guards. (Click to enlarge)



Web sites by the EPA and California Public Health that I should seriously consider discarding every porous item that cannot be put into a clothes washer (like my couch, mattresses, art work, etc.)

I had spent days seeing physicians, consulting with experts, looking for a safe, mold-free home, and coming up with a plan to deal with my infested possessions. All of this at a time when I was spending up to 4 hours a day in the classroom and falling further behind on grant writing and project management responsibilities.

I was not about to move my moldy possessions without proper precautions, so it looked as though I would not move out of the house in time. At that point, for the first time, the business office showed a little concern. I got some assistance from the business office in the form of them helping me to find a temperature-controlled storage space to store my stuff temporarily.

Since then I've spent weeks of my time cleaning stuff, including laundering or dry cleaning all my clothes. I have replaced a number of major household items and even having to discard some of my cherished artwork and instruments. I called a couple professionals who deal with these matters but they were booked weeks in advance because of the recent floods.

It's been a real mess: with my possessions in temporary storage, I've had to make item-by-item calls as to what items I can into my new condo, what needs to be discarded, and washing all non-porous items with bleach water. I've hired temporary help to clean things.

I wound up having allergic reactions to my new condo, forcing me to break the lease and find another rental. I've never experienced reactions like this before, but now there are places I can only visit comfortably if I take allergy medications.

All of this would be easier to deal with if the folks in the business office would sit down to address the problem, but they have been evasive and sometimes misleading. I've have spent thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours addressing the damage and the UI Business Office has been dismissive, refusing to proactively solve the problem. This only exacerbates the sense of ill-treatment, with every decision I make impinging on my budget.

My allergist has treated me for 15 years for animal allergies, but the mold and mildew is new.
(Click to enlarge)



Only days after mopping the floor dry, more water seeps into the basement.
(Click to enlarge)



UI Business Office reports that experts have looked at the problem and taken care of the mold. This is what "taken care of" looks like.
(Click to enlarge)



24 hours before new tenants move in, the mold is painted over while powerful fans dry the rainwater and blow spores around the house.
(Click to enlarge)

The most distressing thing is this: after damaging my health so seriously by their negligence, the University of Iowa's Business Office, citing clearance from the experts in Public Health and the UI Health Protection Office (which I have not been able to verify), simply had an unprotected worker paint over the worst of the mold and moved five students into the building the next day. This is contrary to everything I've read about mold remediation and seems to me to be blatantly unethical.

I presented all of these issues to the University Ombudsperson. The terse reply from the Business Office was, "file a claim and sign an agreement to never broach the issue again." The ombudsperson kindly offered to help, if I could tell her what to do, but that's backwards: if I run someone over with my car, I am obliged to help, even if the victim doesn't instruct me on how to be helpful.

I have neither seen nor heard any evidence that the UI has done a proper mold remediation. The current tenants are aware that there was a mold problem, but have been convinced by the business office staff that the problem has been fixed. (The tenants report that the UI offered to pay them to run the air conditioner for a month.)

I'm very anxious to understand the impacts on my health and I'm very uncomfortable getting into a tussle with my home institution. I am convinced that I went above and beyond what can be expected of a tenant and that poor management and neglect lead to a breakdown that has harmed my health, consumed a great deal of my time, and leaves me facing continuing losses of property, time, and well-being. I am embarrassed for my university that the Business Office can be so cavalier about their tenants' health.

It is with great regret that I raise these issues, but I am convinced that the practices of the University of Iowa's Business Office need to change to taking full responsibility to protect the health and safety of their tenants.

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