

The Accessory Apartments program is a project of HousingUs, an initiative of Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation.

HousingUs is a tri-state collaborative effort of nonprofit organizations and community leaders to promote broad-based affordable housing options in towns throughout the northwest corner of CT, northeast Dutchess and Columbia Counties in NY and southern Berkshire County.

For more information, please visit our website at [www.housingus.org](http://www.housingus.org).



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# The Accessory Apartments Program

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO CREATING  
AN ACCESSORY APARTMENT

**Cornwall, Connecticut**



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# housing:

LET'S PUT THE US BACK IN HOUSING

Would some extra income help balance your budget? ■ Is your house too big, but you do not want to leave your home? ■ Would it feel less isolated to have someone else living nearby but separately? ■ Do you have an aging relative who is not ready for a retirement home but doesn't want to live with you? ■ Do you like the idea of helping young people get started in life? ■ Have you thought of creating an apartment in your home but don't know how to proceed?

This guide will take you step by step through the process of creating and renting an apartment from design and permitting to tenant selection. If you have any questions along the way, please contact:

Jocelyn Ayer  
Accessory Apartments  
Program Coordinator  
Phone: 413.229.0370 x105  
Email: [jayer@housingus.org](mailto:jayer@housingus.org)

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is an accessory apartment?

An accessory apartment (also referred to as an in-law apartment) can be created or remodeled from a space you already have in your home. An apartment can also be created in a separate structure, in a barn, or over a garage.

### What are the benefits of having an accessory apartment?

- Provides rental income to help pay the mortgage.
- Adds value to your home and offers tax benefits.
- Creates housing options, including the ability to live in the accessory apartment yourself with children or grandchildren in the main house.
- Gives homeowners the option to barter reduced rents for help such as shoveling walks and running errands. This arrangement often allows seniors to stay in their homes.
- Tenants provide additional security for seniors and those who travel frequently.
- Supports the community by providing affordable housing to those who are looking for a place to live close to where they work, such as teachers and healthcare workers.



## Will I like being a landlord?

Renting an apartment in your home comes with many responsibilities and can have many rewards. Finding good tenants will make these responsibilities easier and increase the rewards. In this guide we explain the process for screening tenants and provide reference materials that explain a landlord's role in more detail.

If you would like to speak with people who have built and rented an apartment in their homes, we have a list of contacts you can call to talk about their experiences.

## What do I do next?

### Step 1: Contact us!

Contact Jocelyn Ayer at 413.229.0370 x105 or [jayer@housingus.org](mailto:jayer@housingus.org). She will explain our program in more detail, answer your questions, and discuss your level of interest.

### Step 2: Schedule a home visit and consultation by our team—at no charge

Our coordinator will work with you to schedule a visit by our local Accessory Apartments volunteers. During this visit we can look at the space you propose to use as an apartment and provide feedback and suggestions. We will help estimate the costs of construction and identify potential problems. We will find out exactly where you'd like our assistance and let you know the next steps.

### Step 3: Get a cost estimate

If needed, after the home visit, we can set up a meeting with an experienced builder to give you a rough cost estimate for creating the apartment.



## What will the costs be?

Four major categories of costs may be associated with your project: **SOFT COSTS** such as the costs of an architect or soil testing for septic capacity.

**CONSTRUCTION COSTS** These include the costs for building materials and labor and will vary depending on the amount of work involved. A minor renovation could be fairly inexpensive. An Accessory Apartments program in Brattleboro, VT reports that costs typically range from \$2,500 to \$40,000 depending on the amount of work involved.

**PERMITTING FEES** Zoning and building permits average about \$300, depending on the value of the proposed construction work. See Step 6 for more details on these permits.

**TAXES AND INSURANCE** Having an apartment may increase your insurance costs. You should check with your insurance agent. Your property tax may increase if your town decides that the apartment has substantially increased the property's value. And the income you get from the apartment is taxable. However, the apartment's share of the cost of owning and operating the property is deductible from your income (e.g. its share of insurance cost, property tax, fuel, repairs, etc.).

## Will the rent cover these expenses?

In most cases your rental income can repay the costs of construction in two to five years. To help you think about whether it will be worthwhile to create an apartment we can provide you with a budget worksheet (see Appendix C available online). You can use it to estimate the apartment's income and operating costs and see what your net income is likely to be.

### Step 4: Find architectural design assistance

Apartments can be created or remodeled from space you already have. This could be on the first or second floor of your house, in a walk-out basement, or in a garage or barn. You can also create a new apartment by adding on to your house or building a freestanding structure.

Sometimes an owner is able to sketch a good plan for the apartment with which we can get a rough preliminary cost estimate. If design help is needed, we may be able to help arrange for it.

Keep in mind that your town's zoning commission may have their own design related regulations such as requiring a fire escape to be located to the side or rear of the home. For your town's zoning requirements, see Appendix B.

### **Step 5: Choose a contractor**

It is often wise to hire a general contractor to oversee the project and supervise (or "subcontract") carpentry, plumbing, electric, etc., unless you have experience with such projects.



Reputation is the best guide in choosing a general contractor. As good contractors are often booked months in advance, you should start looking early – as soon as you have even a rough idea of the project. Talk with other people in the area who've had similar work done. Was the contractor competent? Did they have useful ideas? Did they hire good sub-contractors? Did the work keep moving and get done roughly when they'd said? Was the cost close to or less than their estimate? Were they easy to work with?

We can provide you with suggestions for general contractors, electricians, plumbers, septic engineers and others who we believe to be competent and reliable.

Call at least two of the contractors and explain your project. Ask if they have experience with your type of project and when they could begin work. Ask the contractor for references from two or three homeowners for whom they've recently completed work. Call the references and ask about their experience with the contractor, including whether they would hire her/him again. If possible, arrange to look at a contractor's prior work.

### **Step 6: Get zoning and building permits**

#### **Zoning Permit Steps**

See Appendix B for an outline of the regulatory requirements for an accessory apartment and the application process.

You can obtain the necessary permit application in the land use office of town hall and discuss the process and requirements with the zoning enforcement officer. We can help you prepare and file a zoning permit application.

*If your property is served by a private septic system and/or well, you must receive Torrington Area Health District (TAHD) approval BEFORE you receive zoning approval. See Appendix B for details.*

## Building Permit Steps

After you get your zoning permit (and septic approval, if necessary) you will need a building permit to start construction.

When applying to the Building Department you must submit the following:

- two sets of plans
- a building permit application
- proof of insurance (if you are a contractor); if you are not a contractor you must fill out an affidavit
- permit fee

The current fee for a building permit is based on the estimated value of the work being done. It is \$25 for the first \$1,000 and \$7 for each additional \$1,000 of estimated value. For example, if you are building an apartment that costs \$15,000, your building permit fee will be \$123.

Once you have submitted the building permit application materials, the Building Department will have up to 30 days to review and approve them. Once a building permit is issued, you may start construction.

## Step 7: Obtain financing

Salisbury Bank & Trust Company and National Iron Bank offer special programs and rates for homeowners who are creating an accessory apartment. Call your representative at these banks or contact us for current bank contact information. Other local banks may offer such programs as well.

## Step 8: Find a tenant

### Being a Landlord

If things go well – and they generally do – you’ll have a problem-free, hopefully enjoyable, relationship with your tenant. The clearer you both are about your rights and responsibilities, the happier things will be. There is an excellent book, published by Fannie Mae, called *Becoming a Landlord*. For a copy call 800.752.2000.

In case you’re unclear about the law or a problem develops during your first year as a landlord, we provide a hotline to a professional property manager. Just call us.

## Tenant Selection

People who have an apartment in the home they live in are free to rent, or not rent, to whomever they choose.

Before accepting inquiries you should consider what you are looking for in a tenant. Being clear about what you want may influence how you go about looking for the right person. If the apartment is on your second floor, for example, noise may be more of a concern than if it is over a detached garage.

There are many ways to go about finding a good tenant: word of mouth, flyers or bulletin boards, newspaper ads, etc. Whatever method you choose, be sure to screen applicants carefully before you offer a lease.

## How do I screen a possible tenant?

When you first talk with a prospect be sure they understand what you’re offering – are there laundry facilities, will you allow pets, etc. – as well as what the rent will be and whether it includes utilities.



If a person seems like a good prospect, ask them to complete an application. (For a sample application see Appendix D on our website.)

Then:

1. Call the people listed as references on the application and ask them for information about your applicant. Be sure to ask whether they would rent to (in the case of a former landlord) or hire (if an employer) the person again.
2. Ask previous landlords whether the applicant paid their rent on time.
3. Do a background check that will tell you whether an applicant has a criminal record or civil violations. It's much better to do this before renting to someone than to learn about their history later. You will need to have the applicant sign an authorization for the background check. We can help you do the background check.

### **Rental Agreement**

For your protection and your tenant's, there should be a written rental agreement or lease. (See Appendix E on our website.)

### **Bookkeeping and Reports**

For tax purposes, and so that you'll know how your investment in the apartment is working out, you should keep careful track of rental income and expenses. Expenses you need to keep track of are all those that are attributable partly or entirely to the apartment. Usually they will be the expenses listed on our budget worksheet.

All landlords are required to file IRS Schedule E with their tax return. Part I is probably the only part you'll need to complete. If you've kept good track of all the expenses that are on our budget worksheet, you should have no trouble with Schedule E.

### **Step 9: Call on us for support!**

You can call on us for assistance with anything that comes up in the first year of being a landlord. We provide a hotline to a professional property manager if any problems arise or if you have a question about your responsibilities. *We look forward to working with you to create an accessory apartment!*

## **Appendix A: Resources and Contacts for Cornwall, CT**

### **Program Contacts**

#### **ACCESSORY APARTMENTS PROGRAM COORDINATOR**

Jocelyn Ayer

Phone: 413.229.0370 x105

Email: [jayer@housingus.org](mailto:jayer@housingus.org)

Website: [www.housingus.org](http://www.housingus.org)

### **Town of Cornwall Contacts**

#### **ZONING ENFORCEMENT OFFICER**

Karen Nelson

Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 9 a.m. to noon

Phone: 860.672.4957

#### **BUILDING INSPECTOR**

Paul Prindle

Office hours: Monday – Friday 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. Call first.

Office: Northwest Lumber & Hardware in Cornwall Bridge

Phone: 860.672.0711

#### **TORRINGTON AREA HEALTH DISTRICT OFFICER**

Cathy Weber, Registered Sanitarian for Cornwall

Hours: Monday and Wednesday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Office: 350 Main Street, Torrington, CT 06790.

Phone: 860.489.0436

### **Books & Guides**

*Creating an Accessory Apartment* (1987)

by Patrick Hare and Jolene Ostler

*Becoming a Landlord* by Fannie Mae

(for a copy call 800.752.2000)

# Appendix B: Summary of Zoning Regulations and Application Process for Accessory Apartments in Cornwall, CT

## Relevant Sections of Zoning Regulations

Section 8.10 “Accessory Apartments”

Section 8.11 “Conversion of Residences to Apartments”

Section 8.12 “Apartment Use in a Business Building”

A special permit is required in all cases.

## OWNER OCCUPANCY

The owner of the property that contains an accessory apartment generally must live on the property either in the main residence or in the accessory apartment. However, in the following two scenarios there is no requirement for owner occupancy if:

- your home was built before 1945
- you are creating an apartment use in a business building

## SIZE OF APARTMENT

- The accessory apartment must have its own complete kitchen and bath.
- The total livable floor area of the apartment can be no less than 350 square feet and no greater than 1200 square feet.
- Upon completion of the accessory apartment, the total livable area floor area of the apartment can be no greater than 40% of the total floor area of the primary residence.
- An accessory apartment may be an efficiency unit, one-bedroom or two-bedroom unit.

## Two Apartments Allowed In Pre-1945 Homes

In homes that were on the Assessor’s List as of 1945, two additional apartments are permitted. Each apartment unit shall contain a minimum of 450 square feet for a one-bedroom or efficiency apartment, plus 125 square feet per additional bedroom.

## DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

- No new entrance is allowed to be added to front of the residence.
- Stairway and fire escapes must be located on the rear or side of the building.

## PARKING

There must be at least three off-street parking spaces for the use of the primary residence and the accessory apartment.

In homes built before 1945, two parking spaces each are required for the first two dwelling units and one for the third unit. They may be required to be screened from view of the street.

## SPECIAL PERMIT APPLICATION PROCESS

**STEP 1:** Pick up a copy of the zoning permit application and the special permit application in the zoning office of town hall. If you’re not sure what you need, ask Karen Nelson, the Zoning Enforcement Officer.

**STEP 2:** Submit completed applications, site plan and fees. Current fees: zoning \$75 in addition to a special permit fee of \$130.

**STEP 3:** Attend the Planning & Zoning Commission meeting when your application will be considered.

This process generally takes 2 to 3 months from the time you submit a completed application and requires a public hearing.

## Septic System Requirements

If your property is served by a private septic system, you must receive Torrington Area Health District (TAHD) approval BEFORE you receive zoning approval. Contact information for Cornwall's official is listed in Appendix A.

You may be required to build a new or expanded septic system to accommodate the increased number of bedrooms served by your existing septic system. This will depend on the number of bedrooms you are adding and the age of your septic system. The regulations that govern this are complicated. But in general, if you don't add 50% OR MORE of the total number of bedrooms in your home and the apartment is ATTACHED, you may be able to avoid having to add a new septic system for an accessory apartment.

For example: If you have a 3 bedroom home, you may be able to add an attached one bedroom accessory apartment (within the existing structure or in an attached garage) without having to build a new septic system.

### Q & A: When will a new septic system be required?

**Q: If the homeowner is renovating space within an existing dwelling to add an apartment by converting existing bedrooms and not adding new ones will they need to add septic capacity?**

A: You will probably not need to add septic capacity if the apartment is within the existing residence, and you are not increasing the number of bedrooms in the home.

**Q: If the homeowner is turning an existing structure such as a garage or barn into a one bedroom apartment will they need to add septic capacity?**

A: If the garage or barn is ATTACHED to the home, even with a breezeway, you may only have to add septic capacity if you are adding 50% or more of the number of bedrooms in the existing residence.

However, if the garage or barn is DETACHED, you will need to add a separate septic system and reserve area for the accessory apartment



UNLESS you are only adding a one bedroom apartment, then you may be able to connect to the existing septic system. However this will require State Health Department review and approval.

For more information, we can provide you with a copy of the Frequently Asked Questions handout on septic system requirements and approval process for Accessory Apartments.

**For Appendix C, D, and E please see our website ([www.housingus.org](http://www.housingus.org)) or contact us!**

**Appendix C: Budget Worksheet**

**Appendix D: Sample Rental Application**

**Appendix E: Sample Lease Form**