

## **Amid VCU's Housing Shortage, A Transfer Student's Housing Hunt Becomes an Uphill Battle.**

By Elsa Hoppe

RICHMOND, Va. – The excitement and joy of receiving a VCU acceptance letter shortly turned into fear and worry for incoming VCUarts student Cedar Meade. In the midst of the university's shortage of housing and the city of Richmond's housing crisis, many students like Meade must face the challenges and responsibilities as first-time renters.

"I always knew I wanted to go to VCU. It was really my number one goal," Meade said. "I applied a few days before the deadline... when I finally was accepted, I immediately jumped on the housing."

Even though Meade promptly applied to housing, she placed 548 on the housing waitlist.

With the closure of the Johnson Residential Hall and limited space in other dorms, VCU assigns housing on a first come, first serve basis with a priority to Freshman. According to the VCU off-campus website, that leaves 80% of students living off-campus.

Meade attended community college in Northern Virginia her first year, with a plan to attend VCUarts her sophomore year. As a transfer student, her housing search differs from continuing VCU students who can search for housing early on. It wasn't until May, a time when most students have solidified housing plans, that she was able to start looking.

She began her search by using VCU's off-campus housing website which is a tool that allows students to create profiles to find roommates and view housing listings.

While VCU's tools and resources aid and inform students on the renting process, VCU cannot support or endorse any property which leaves the responsibility of finding housing solely to students.

"I do think that the off-campus housing website is a bit of a hands-off approach," Meade said. "I asked them about the off campus website... like possible assistance.. and I was just directed to the website itself."

Meade's housing search was a month-long challenge of finding a place that accommodated all of her needs. One of her biggest obstacles was the misinformation and lack of up-to-date availability for listed properties.

“I think a lot of property listers just check all the boxes because they want to get as many applicants as possible,” Meade said. “It can be just a little bit misleading and make things even more confusing... waste more time when your time can be very valuable while looking for a property.”

With the rising cost of living in the Richmond area, Meade’s budget limited her choices.

According to Axios, in the fourth quarter of 2022, the average asking rent in Richmond was \$1,285, up 8.8% from a year earlier.

Meade also added that furniture played a big, financial role in choosing an apartment. She recently disposed of all of her furniture in preparation for living in the dorms, so she was ill-prepared to fully furnish an apartment.

Through her entire housing experience, Meade expressed the biggest disappointment was giving up the quintessential college dorm experience

“I was really looking forward to living in a dorm just to try and get my footing at VCU,” Meade said. “Common areas in the dorms can be a really big part of finding a social life at VCU to begin with. Not having that was a very big downer.”

Meade unexpectedly found a place to live from a VCU tour guide who also works for a property management company in the Richmond area. She described the experience as “lucky” finding an apartment that is close to campus, reasonably priced and furnished.

“I want people to know that even if you weren't able to find VCU dorms or on-campus housing, you can still participate in college life,” Meade said. “You won't be left behind.”

## **VCU Students Grapple with Securing Accommodations, Unaware of an Essential Student Support Tool**

By Elsa Hoppe

RICHMOND, Va. – VCU students struggle to find aid in their apartment searches amidst the university’s shortage of beds and Richmond’s housing crisis. An overlooked tool provided by the university, the VCU off-campus housing website, seeks to connect students, list available properties and educate students about the leasing process.

According to VCU, the university has 5703 beds to accommodate the 21,270 undergraduates enrolled.

The struggle to find housing encompasses a majority of the VCU student population, but it is even more difficult for transfer students who begin looking for housing when they are accepted late in the spring semester.

Transfer student, Cedar Meade, applied to housing as soon as she received her acceptance letter. Once she applied, VCU informed her that she placed 548 on the waitlist.

“I was so far back on that list and I had no idea how many other students had also applied...so it left me in kind of a stressful spot,” Meade said.

Meade began her search for housing by reaching out to VCU services which directed her to the off-campus housing website.

The off-campus housing website lists paid advertisements for properties around the area. Students using the website can also create profiles to match with other students looking for housing, book appointments with VCU officials to go over housing issues and review a variety of resources such as a step-by-step plan to secure housing.

“I do think that the off-campus website had some cool opportunities...there were some housing options that were very good looking to me,” Meade said. “It can be a helpful resource.”

Assistant director for student support, Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, oversees the VCU off-campus website as well as a variety of other student services. Her work with the off-campus website entails meeting regularly with students experiencing off-campus housing issues.

With the rampant increase of rents in Richmond, Mathews-Ailsworth explained that students often sign leases to apartments they cannot afford.

“It's very hard to work part-time and earn thousands of dollars,” Mathews-Ailsworth said. “Number one concern I see is students not running their numbers before they make decisions.”

According to a report released by the partnership for housing affordability, average rents across the city rose around 20% since the pandemic.

Another issue Mathews-Ailsworth sees among students is the financial responsibility for roommates under joint leases.

Joint leases are housing agreements where every tenant is liable for the rent. If a student's roommate defaults on their payment, the student must assume responsibility for their roommate's portion of the bill.

"I have a student whose roommate moved and she's refusing to pay...the student owes \$3,000 by next week or else she's going to be evicted," Mathews-Ailsworth said. "And unfortunately, there's nothing as a university we can do to assist with that."

Mathews-Ailsworth explained that the root of solving students' issues with living off-campus is "more education upfront."

The VCU off-campus website advises students to sign individual leases and evaluate which options are affordable through a budget template. However, this information is only available to the students who know about the website.

"I think we just don't, as a university, do a good job highlighting all the resources that are available on campus," Mathews-Ailsworth said. "There are just so many resources... I don't think students always know about them unless they are ingrained in the culture."

According to Mathews-Ailsworth, they only see a fraction of the near 600 students who are on the housing waitlist use the website.

As students' housing issues persist, Mathews-Ailsworth emphasized the importance of recognizing the off-campus website as an essential tool worth investing in.

"This conversation is the need for our university to put resources into this service...like I said, this is about a quarter of my job, not even one full-time person," Mathews-Ailsworth said. "But yet we have full-time people on this campus doing all kinds of other jobs that I feel are less critical."