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'The perfect vehicle': Vacation rentals are increasingly being used for crime



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It was the worst condition Angela Jones had ever found one of the vacation rental houses she owns or manages around Salem in the nine years she's been in the industry.

Every cabinet of the house on High Street SE had been opened and emptied. Trash was strewn about. The door to the storage room was open and its contents were on the floor. The attic and crawl spaces had been opened and ransacked.

She thought the renters had trashed the house.

It was actually the police.

It took a neighbor walking his dogs for Jones to learn the house had been searched by Salem Police and the FBI. They had arrested the woman who rented the house through Airbnb and her boyfriend, and seized \$700,000 worth of heroin, cocaine, fentanyl and methamphetamine and dozens of guns.

"Nobody told me. And nobody told the property owner," Jones said. "How dangerous."

Reports of people using Airbnb and other vacation rental properties for criminal activity have grown around the country in the past few years.

In Plano, Texas, two short-term rentals were used as a brothel. In Seattle, a renter used a house to manufacture drugs. In South Florida, smugglers rented a waterfront home to bring in large quantities of cocaine.

“This is the perfect vehicle for criminals,” Jones said. “Basically, as long as they have a credit card, they go in, they book it and it’s theirs. There’s no rental agreement. There’s no credit check. There’s no criminal background check.”

Salem Police did not answer a question from the Statesman Journal about the frequency of crimes at short-term rentals in the city.

A Salem city councilor who said her constituents are worried about short-term rentals, has requested the City Council begin conversations about whether they should be banned in residential neighborhoods.

From dental hygienist to property manager

Jones has owned a building in downtown Salem for nearly 30 years.

She started using it as a short-term rental property in 2015. It went better than expected.

“Once you have one, you really want to have another,” Jones said. “It makes you so much money, you’re just like, ‘This this is incredible.’”

A 2019 state law made it harder for landlords to evict tenants and limits how much they can increase rent.

Jones said those restrictions made short-term rentals more attractive, and spurred some owners of longer-term rentals to move to short term.

Rentals became her full-time job in 2021, and she now manages 25 units, some short-term and others by the month. She said they stay mostly occupied. Her clients include travel nurses on assignment at Salem Health, grandparents coming to a graduation and members of the state Legislature.

The rental house in South Salem

Jones had been managing the South Salem house as a vacation rental for about a year and a half. It doesn't qualify for short-term rental as it is rented by the month.

It's a three-bedroom, two bathroom house in the middle of a suburban neighborhood. The owner lives next door, and it was formerly her mother's house.

In September, a woman booked the house for a three-month stay starting that month. She said her husband was in construction and would be in town for a job.

For much of the time they were there, Jones said, the couple seemed normal. Then signs started appearing.

The renters disconnected the internet on multiple occasions.

The woman who owns the house reported to Jones a few instances of visitors to the house.

When she asked the renter, Jones said, the woman told her she had a daughter who lived in Portland who would occasionally visit with her family.

"She literally answers all of my questions, so I have no suspicion of this woman," Jones said.

What Jones didn't know was that law enforcement was surveilling the house.

According to court records, police had been following the man since August, long before they moved in. A police informant had alleged he had purchased drugs from the man.

Police had been watching the house since Oct. 27, according to court records. On Dec. 8, they searched the trash and found drug paraphernalia.

Home inspection close call

The couple living in the house was scheduled to move out Dec. 30 and into another of Jones' rentals.

Jones said she wanted to make sure they knew what to do with check-out instructions. She said she tried calling, emailing and messaging the renter through Airbnb, but got no response.

So on Dec. 22, Jones arrived at the house at about 11 a.m. She knocked and no one answered. So she let herself in with the key she had, saying she called out “Housekeeping.”

The couple was in bed, Jones said. The woman got up, put on a robe and talked with her for about half an hour about check-out requirements like washing dishes and starting the laundry. Then Jones left and went about her day.

Jones describes the condition of the house at that time as “lived in, but not trashed.”

According to court documents, police later found 24 guns at the house, including shotguns, rifles and a semi-automatic AK-47.

“They could have shot me,” Jones said.

Police raid the house

On Dec. 27, three days before they were to move out of the rental, the couple left the house in an SUV, according to the affidavit from an FBI agent. Police pulled them over a few blocks away and searched the vehicle. They reported finding fentanyl, about \$11,000 and two guns.

Then police searched the house and found 13,244 grams of methamphetamine, 5,080 grams of counterfeit oxycodone pills that contained fentanyl, 5,624 grams of cocaine, 1,088 grams of heroin, \$43,000 in cash and the guns, according to court records. Police estimated the value of the drugs they removed from the car and home at \$700,000.

Three days later, Jones and her crew of two workers entered the house to clean it. She barely recognized it.

“Everything is taken apart, everything is turned over, every cupboard, every door is open,” Jones said. “They’ve taken stuff out of the refrigerator and stomped on it. We’re like, ‘Who

was here?’ And I’m like, ‘How did they do this in one week?’”

After spending hours cleaning the house, Jones went outside to throw trash away and was stopped by a neighbor walking his dogs. He asked her how the house looked inside.

Jones responded that it was bad. He told her there'd been a drug raid.

It was her first indication of what had happened. The owner living next door hadn't been there at the time of the raid. Police never contacted Jones or the owner, Jones said.

Jones said she later talked with a Salem Police detective involved in the case and he told her the department had no policies about alerting property owners when something like that happens.

Jones is furious, saying she could have walked into anything when she went inside to discuss the check-out or later when they cleaned the property. She said they did find some pills and bullets while cleaning up.

“I’m like another example of not protecting your fricking citizens,” Jones said. “Another example, Salem Police, of you dropping the ball and not protecting your community.”

In an email to Salem Police seeking information about department policy regarding crimes committed at rentals, they responded, “Salem Police will generally contact the renter or authorized person who has entered into the contract with the owner.”

Follow-up questions about the specific incident were not answered by the department. The FBI did not respond to questions about the case.

Jones is now putting cameras outside the rentals that she owns, and she is advising the owners of the properties she manages to do the same.

The couple that was arrested had another of Jones' rentals booked for the day they were to check out of the house that was raided. Jones said after the arrest, Airbnb canceled the reservation and refunded the pair \$11,000.

They were in jail at that time.

Airbnb has not responded to specific questions about the Salem situation.

Salem could prohibit short-term rentals

Salem requires a license to operate a rental if the tenants are going to stay for fewer than 30 days. It costs \$275 initially, and \$161 to renew each year.

A city spokesperson said there are 36 licensed short-term rentals in Salem. Jones, who said her short-term rentals are licensed, estimated there are closer to 100 operating in and around the city.

Salem's City Council on Monday is expected to discuss whether to have staff research and assemble a report about whether the city should limit or ban short-term rentals in residential neighborhoods.

City councilor Linda Nishioka, who requested the council discuss the idea, said it came in response to concerns from residents about the nature of who occupies short-term rentals in the city.

"The unoccupied short-term rental is not your neighbor who you check in with, have coffee with, or keep an eye on their house when they go out of town," Nishioka said in an email. "An unoccupied short-term rental house is a loss of neighborhood community."

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