



## Why Community Organizations Should Care About Smoke-Free Rental Housing and What They Can Do To Promote It

Community organizations and neighborhood groups play crucial roles in development of new housing. They may provide funding for new or renovated buildings, approve plans for housing that someone wants to construct in the community, and identify needs for particular types of housing.

One of the needs seldom addressed is for smoke-free rental units. Very few owners of apartment buildings protect their tenants from unwanted cigarette smoke. Yet the movement of smoke from the unit where it was generated into nearby units is very common. Almost half of the Minnesota renters in a recent survey reported that smoke comes into their apartment unit from somewhere outside the unit. Of these, over a third said that smoke bothers them “a lot” or “so much I’m thinking of moving.” Owners interviewed in a recent study confirmed that tobacco smoke is a problem, that it is the second most important source of objectionable odors in apartment buildings. Yet they show little interest in doing anything about the problem.

Almost half of the renters surveyed said that they were extremely or very interested in living in a building free of tobacco smoke. A sizeable number of renters of various ages, ethnicities, and ability to pay prefer smoke-free living. Over a third of renters would be willing to pay more to live in a smoke-free building, and others would be willing to make other tradeoffs like walking farther to a bus line or commuting a longer distance.

What does this mean for neighborhoods? The availability of smoke-free rental housing means

- A child-friendly neighborhood. Children are particularly vulnerable to the health effects of secondhand smoke. Each year, between 150,000 and 300,000 cases of pneumonia and bronchitis are attributed to exposure to secondhand smoke. It is one of the major triggers for asthma. Exposure to tobacco smoke can actually cause asthma in susceptible children. Cigarette smoke is one of the leading causes of indoor air pollution in residences. Just as neighborhood groups are concerned about lead, they should be concerned about secondhand smoke.
- A healthier neighborhood. Moreover, research shows that living in a household with a no-smoking policy encourages residents to reduce the amount they smoke or simply to quit. Obviously any reduction in smoking reduces the deleterious effects of tobacco, whose victims are disproportionately among low-income groups.
- A safer neighborhood. Discarded smoking materials are the leading cause of death in residential fires. Cigarettes are designed to stay lit, even when the smoker is not drawing on them. If a smoker falls asleep or passes out while smoking, the cigarette may fall into a mattress or upholstery where it

smolders for hours only to burst into flames. One cigarette-related fire in a Shoreview apartment complex in 2001 killed one adult, injured three, and rendered two of the four buildings uninhabitable, leaving 100 residents without a home. The victims of cigarette-caused fires frequently include children and the elderly.

- Safeguarding investments. Cigarette burns on counters and carpets are eliminated with a smoke-free policy. The policy also eliminates the tar residue that collects on windows, blinds, and walls. And once the odor of tobacco smoke permeates a building, it is exceedingly difficult to remove it. Redecorating a unit in which no smoking has occurred is less expensive than redecorating one in which someone has regularly smoked. Healthy, well-maintained buildings are obviously good for a neighborhood and its residents.
- Environmental justice. People that own their own homes can readily protect themselves from secondhand smoke. Renters comprise roughly a quarter of Minnesota households and disproportionately include minorities, people with low incomes, and young adults. They too should be able to protect themselves from dangerous indoor air pollution..

What can neighborhood groups do to promote smoke-free housing and to make the supply of it come closer to the demand?

- Insist that new rental multihousing erected in their neighborhood include some, if not all, smoke-free buildings.
- Convert buildings under their control to smoke-free buildings.
- Educate funders, policy makers, landlords, and others in their community about the issue and the benefits of eliminating smoking in apartment buildings.

Live Smoke Free can assist your organization, funders, and owners of apartment buildings with

- Research on the extent of the problem and the market for smoke-free apartments,
- Information on the legal issues involved in providing or failing to provide smoke-free rental property prepared by an attorney experienced in rental issues,
- A guide for landlords wishing to implement a smoke-free policy in a building where smoking is now permitted, and
- A model lease addendum.