

Increasing Access to Smoke-Free Housing in Boston: Investing in Healthier Homes and Communities

Summary

In order to address higher rates of both smoking and exposure to second hand smoke in subsidized housing, Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing is providing training, technical assistance and resources to Section 8 tenants and landlords in Boston.

In the summer of 2015, with this support, a Section 8 tenant, Edna Willrich, and her landlord, Wendy Rist, successfully transitioned their building to smoke-free.

Many more Section 8 homes are expected to follow, which could change the landscape of housing and health in Boston and spread benefits of smoke-free housing to some of Boston's most vulnerable residents.

Challenge

When Edna Willrich learned about the Partners in Health and Housing's smoke-free housing initiative at a Boston Housing Authority (BHA) Section 8 meeting, she saw an opportunity to protect the health of her neighbors at her building, who are mostly elderly Blacks and Latinos. Meanwhile, her landlord, Wendy Rist, who attended the same meeting, saw both the benefits of investing in her property, as well as the health of her residents.

Like most Boston residents, Ms. Edna (as she prefers to be called) and her neighbors do not smoke. However, with new tenants moving in, she was afraid that their building would no longer be smoke-free as there is no policy prohibiting smoking in the building. In 2013, close to 30% of subsidized housing residents in Boston were smokers, nearly double the rate of residents of unsubsidized, market rate housing (16%) (BRFSS, 2013). Additionally, like Ms. Edna, residents of subsidized housing in Boston live in multi-unit housing, such as apartment buildings and multi-family homes, where non-smokers can be exposed to second hand smoke because the air inside buildings is shared with neighboring units and common areas.

While smoke-free housing is popular (surveys indicate that 8 in 10 residents in Massachusetts prefer smoke-free housing (PHAI, 2009)), the supply for smoke-free housing has not kept up with the demand. Meanwhile, landlords in Boston are also interested in going smoke-free, but sometimes lack the information, education, and resources to do so.

Solution

With funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Boston REACH: Partners in Health and Housing is working with BHA public housing developments and Section 8 housing, which houses 33,000 Boston residents, to address this gap and expand the availability and access to smoke-free housing and its health, safety, and economic benefits. By promoting the benefits of smoke-free housing and offering trainings and technical assistance to landlords and tenants, we are working to help more and more Boston homes go smoke-free, ensuring cleaner air and healthier environments in the home, where people spend the most time.



"My building was already voluntarily smoke-free, but with new tenants moving in, we wanted to keep it that way to ensure that my neighbors and I, who are mostly elderly, could continue to live in a healthy environment."

- Edna Willrich



Ms. Edna Willrich, Section 8 tenant

Results

In the spring of 2015, Partners in Health & Housing hosted its first Section 8 and rental assisted smoke-free housing training, attracting around 20 BHA Section 8 landlords and property managers, including Ms. Rist. The training presented the case for smoke-free housing and best practices for implementing a smoke-free housing policy. Key takeaways from the presentation included:

- **Health benefits for residents and staff**
- **Safety benefits for residents and staff due to reduced risk of fires**
- **Economic benefits for landlords, property owners, and property managers**
- **Popularity of smoke-free housing in Boston and in Massachusetts**

After the training, many participants indicated an interest in making their properties smoke-free, and in the summer of 2015, Ms. Edna and Ms. Rist's building was the first of the group to transition to smoke-free.

Sustainable Success

Over the next two years, the initiative will continue to spread the benefits of smoke-free housing to BHA Section 8 landlords and their tenants, who stand to benefit the most as they have higher rates of heart disease, asthma and lung cancer. In the fall of 2015, Ms. Rist will begin transitioning two other buildings to smoke-free, and Ms. Edna will begin engaging tenants of other Section 8 developments in order to provide education, information, and resources so they can encourage their landlords to go smoke-free. With studies showing significant returns on investment for health, safety, and property, increasing the availability of smoke-free homes promises to help establish lasting change for healthier Boston residents, homes, and communities - for both current and future generations alike.

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Tenant Smoke-Free Housing Meeting