

Boston, MA Tenants Partner with Landlords to Breathe Easier in Smoke-Free Homes

At A Glance

As of May 2016, nearly 2,000 low-income residents in Boston, MA, have greater access to the health and safety benefits of smoke-free housing. A total of 765 Section 8 (Housing Choice) and rental-assisted housing units of the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) became smoke-free as a result of technical assistance provided by the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC). The project – funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – assists landlords, managers, and tenants of subsidized housing in creating healthier home environments.

Public Health Challenge

Where people live can affect their health, and low-income tenants of subsidized housing often suffer from poor health conditions. According to the 2013 Boston Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 27% of Boston residents who live in subsidized housing are smokers compared to 16% of residents in market rate housing. These residents have an increased risk of stroke, heart disease, and lung cancer. Secondhand smoke (SHS) also presents a serious challenge for non-smokers, including children and seniors with asthma, who can be exposed to smoke from neighboring units and common areas in their building. The Surgeon General concludes that the only way to fully protect non-smokers from SHS is to prohibit smoking in all indoor areas. However, landlords and tenants who may want to create healthier home environments often lack the knowledge and resources to implement smoke-free protections.

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, BHA tenant



Approach

BPHC partnered with BHA to improve access to smoke-free housing for low-income tenants in Boston. They used funding from CDC's Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) program to launch Boston REACH: Partners in Health & Housing. The initiative provides training, education, and technical assistance to BHA Section 8 (Housing Choice) and rental-assisted housing landlords, managers, and residents about the health, safety, and economic benefits of implementing smoke-free protections. Participants also learn about challenges and potential solutions in making these changes. In May 2015, a total of 21 landlords, property managers, and tenants attended the first training.

Results

As of May 2016, BPHC has provided 26 trainings and educational presentations on smoke-free housing to 20 landlords, 84 property managers and staff from management companies, and 400 tenants. As a result, these landlords and property managers were able to set up smoke-free housing practices in at least 765 affordable housing units, improving the air quality and quality of life for nearly 2,000 tenants. Landlord Wendy Rist's building was the first

to become smoke-free. She said the training, along with support from tenant leader Edna Willrich, equipped her with the tools and resources to transition. She credits the training with helping her see the benefits of investing in her property as well as the health of her residents. This summer, an additional 850 units are expected to become smoke-free, which will impact an additional 2,125 tenants.

What's Next

Boston REACH: Partners in Health & Housing (PHH) is a 3-year initiative (2014-2017) that has the potential to affect more than 33,000 tenants of Section 8 (Housing Choice) and rental-assisted housing units in Boston. PHH will continue to provide trainings and technical assistance to BHA Section 8 (Housing Choice) and rental-assisted housing landlords, managers, and tenants interested in learning more about smoke-free housing. BHA recently conducted an online survey to better understand landlords' attitudes toward implementing smoke-free housing protections. The results of this survey will inform a Boston citywide smoke-free housing campaign launching in August 2016. For more information, visit www.bostonsmokefreehomes.org.

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Find Out More

To learn more about the Boston REACH: Partners in Health & Housing initiative, visit www.bphc.org/REACHPHH and click on Smoke-Free Homes.

The webpage contains a video in which landlords, residents, and management companies from Boston's affordable, public, and market rate housing discuss how smoke-free protections can benefit everyone. This project is supported by CDC's Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) cooperative agreement.