

Smoke-Free Multi-Unit Dwellings: Looking Back, Moving Forward

Smoking and Health Action Foundation

December 2012

REPORT

Momentum is gaining on the issue of second-hand smoke (SHS) in multi-unit dwellings (MUDs) in Ontario. People have a high level of awareness about the danger of SHS and decreasing tolerance for exposure. Capacity within Public Health Units (PHUs) across the province to respond to this public issue has increased significantly in recent years, and some PHUs are proactively working on the issue.

However, the supply of smoke-free housing remains relatively scarce in Ontario and does not meet demand, which is increasing as more people become aware that such an option is even possible. Beliefs among landlords, property management companies, condominium corporations, developers and housing cooperatives that no-smoking policies are illegal, unenforceable or discriminatory persist as barriers to a greater supply. There is still much to be done before the housing sector as a whole embraces smoke-free air as a mainstream amenity.

Public health and tobacco control professionals from across Ontario met in Toronto in November 2012 to discuss activities that could be undertaken to continue to raise awareness and advance the issue of smoke-free housing. Presentations included:

- Smoke-Free Multi-Unit Dwellings: Looking Back, Moving Forward. Successes and Challenges (Pippa Beck, Smoking and Health Action Foundation)
- Smoke-Free Multi-Unit Dwellings: Media Coverage 2012 (Jason Chapman & Tara Maher, The Media Network, Program Training and Consultation Centre)
- Considerations for Measuring Concentrations of Tobacco Smoke in Multi-Unit Dwellings (Ryan David Kennedy, University of Waterloo)
- Waterloo Region, An Update (Laurie Nagge, Region of Waterloo)
- The Waterloo Experience: Policy and Process Evaluation to Date. Qualitative Research Findings (Pamela Kaufman, Ontario Tobacco Research Unit)

Through some large group discussions, issues were brought forward that participants felt are impeding the advancement of smoke-free housing in Ontario. These included:

- Lack of public education. Misconceptions need to be addressed to communicate that no-smoking policies are legal, enforceable and not discriminatory. Participants agreed that a province-wide mass media campaign is needed.
- Lack of capacity. Many health units indicated they have neither the funding nor the time to allocate to this issue. For example, tobacco enforcement officers are 100% funded under The Smoke-Free Ontario strategy. This does not leave any time to work on issues that fall outside the purview of the *Smoke-Free Ontario Act*. Multi-unit dwellings are not part of the mandated program at the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.
- Challenges with the housing sector.
 - There are 47 service area managers across the province, and the message that no-smoking policies are legal, enforceable and non-discriminatory needs to reach them. Their representative body is the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA).
 - The Federation of Rental Housing Providers of Ontario (FRPO), which represents medium and large landlords, is advising its members that an amendment to the *Residential Tenancies Act* is required before no-smoking policies are enforceable. This is something that tenants' groups will NOT support.
- An unpredictable political situation in Ontario. It could be 12 months or longer before things have settled out.

Participants identified opportunities for local public health units to take action:

- Increasing the use of social media to continue raising public awareness of the problem. For example, Twitter was cited as a possible avenue for creating a very public account of complaints from the general public about exposure to second-hand smoke from neighbouring units.
- Advertising the idea of no-smoking policies on Kijiji and other websites where Ontarians typically search for accommodations. The Peterborough County-City Health Unit took out an ad on Kijiji, which can be seen by visitors to the real estate section of the website.
- Tying the issue to outdoor smoke-free bylaws, which many PHUs are already engaged in. Smoke-free buffer zones around public buildings can include multi-unit dwellings; PHUs could create a kit with information on the need for smoke-free entrances, sample policy wording and a generic no smoking sign.
- Planning for the longer term when developing yearly PHU work plans
- Creating pamphlets to raise public awareness, using local success stories where possible
- Partnering with fire departments and focusing on fire risk as a public education campaign
- Meeting with local landlords and social housing providers to raise awareness

- Making smoke-free housing information and/or templates available to call centres that serve municipalities such that they can make appropriate referrals for people exposed SHS in their own homes
- Making referrals to the Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation (CERA) for people who might qualify as having a disability under the Ontario *Human Rights Code*
- Creating online smoke-free housing registries, such as the initiative by Kingston, Frontenac, and Lennox & Addington PHU¹
- Exploring the use of incentives at the municipal level to encourage the development of smoke-free housing²
- Presenting awards to local landlords who have adopted no-smoking policies. The awards generate goodwill and earn media coverage on the issue.

Opportunities identified for action at the regional level included:

- Making smoke-free MUDs a regional priority and creating working groups that could work with SHAF on specific initiatives
- Partnering with other health units on mass media campaigns. For example, the Peterborough County-City Health Unit recently partnered with the Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District health unit and shared the cost of some bus advertisements promoting smoke-free housing³

Opportunities identified for action at the provincial level included:

- Creating an updated “what’s in it for you” fact sheet for marketing the smoke-free idea to landlords, property managers and condominium corporations. For example, community housing is often marketed as being “safe, well-maintained, affordable housing.” Exposure to second-hand smoke needs to be seen in the same way as exposure to lead or radon.
- Making the Landlord Guide more widely available through such organizations as the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, FRPO, Landlord’s Self Help Centre, and realtor organizations such as the Ontario Real Estate Association
- Harnessing the demand observed in public opinion polling and creating a brand for smoke-free housing complete with a unique identifier and a set of principles. Criteria could be set and qualifying landlords/housing organizations could be certified as smoke-free.
- Creating an updated Q&A document ready to use with press releases, etc.
- Expanding the membership of the Ontario Smoke-Free Housing Coalition to include new partners, such as the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the Environmental Health Association of

¹ www.kflapublichealth.ca/Apps/MUD_Registry.aspx

² www.smokefreehousingon.ca/cms/file/files/tax_Incentives_Fact_Sheet-FINAL.pdf

³ www.smokefreehousingon.ca/sfho/index.cfm?group_id=2315

Ontario, Victoria Order of Nurses, Community Care Access Centres, Canadian Mental Health Association, real estate boards, realtor associations, etc.

- Working with websites such as www.rentit.ca such that landlords and property managers would have to actively choose “no smoking” or “smoking permitted” when advertising their rental vacancies online. Conversely, apartment hunters could refine their searches to include smoking or non.
- Reaching out and networking with the Institute of Housing Management, which promotes best practices through the education and training of property managers.
- Increasing the ability of PHUs to effectively respond to enquiries from the public. A “cheat sheet” or algorithm could ensure staff (and especially new staff) are covering all bases when providing information and advice on exposure to SHS in MUDs.
- Encouraging the Ministry of Health to talk to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to facilitate a more “whole of government” approach to the issue. The Assistant Deputy Minister for Health could raise the issue at the inter-ministerial level.
- Exploring the possibility of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing providing a communiqué to its stakeholders on the legality of adopting no-smoking policies. The Ministry could also consider providing smoke-free housing information on its website.

Conclusion

Despite the many challenges articulated by participants, some PHUs in Ontario are making great strides on the MUDs file. What has become apparent is that where there is support to address the issue at the local level, and where there is a champion, there is a way. More champions can be created through public education, and targeting Medical Officers of Health might be a good place to start. A province-wide public education campaign communicating that no-smoking policies are legal and enforceable is also highly desirable.

Given the unpredictable political situation in Ontario, perhaps the coming year can be focused on activity at the local level, as well as planning at the provincial level. The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing needs to break its silence on this issue. As such, attention to the messaging and possible delivery mechanisms of a Ministry communiqué is warranted. In addition, to increase the reach of the smoke-free housing issue, it appears prudent to expand the membership of the Ontario Smoke-Free Housing Coalition beyond public health units to other health, housing and environmental organizations. These can be accomplished despite the uncertain political backdrop.

Smoke-free housing is not yet the norm in Ontario. However, momentum continues to build, and public health professionals have a pivotal role to play in helping Ontarians to recognize smoke-free as an essential housing amenity.