

BRUCE COUNTY HOUSING CORPORATION

Bruce County, surrounded by the sparkling waters of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, is an outdoor enthusiast's playground offering stunning vistas, kilometers of sandy beaches, and of course, water sports of all kinds. Located 2 hours northwest of Toronto, the county is comprised of 8 municipalities and is known for the famous Bruce Peninsula and Fathom Five—Canada's first national marine conservation area. Bruce County is also home to Ontario's most famous prognosticating rodent: Wiarion Willie.

Bruce County Housing Corporation (BCHC), which is owned and managed by the County of Bruce, has a portfolio of 633 units comprised of rent-geared-to-income, affordable and market housing scattered throughout the county. The corporation's board of directors is comprised entirely of county councilors. For a number of years, social housing staff had noted increasing costs associated with tenant smoking—on average \$300 to \$450 more per unit for cleaning, priming and painting. In some extreme instances, appliances even had to be replaced because of smoke damage. Coupled with these increasing costs were mounting tenant complaints about second-hand smoke and requests for unit transfers. In 2009 when the county secured funds to build a new 36-unit housing development in Port Elgin, it was designated as smoke-free from the outset.

In the summer and fall of 2010, housing staff undertook a large survey to solicit feedback from key stakeholders, which included a tenant satisfaction survey. A total of 22 tenant meetings were held across the county, and surveys were either distributed on site or mailed with a self-addressed and stamped envelope. Ballots to win Tim Horton's gift certificates were also distributed as a thank you for participating. Approximately 53% of BCHC households completed the survey, which is considered an above-average response rate. Although smoking was not included in the survey questions, the issue was nonetheless raised by tenants at some of the meetings and support for a no-smoking policy was voiced.

Survey results were shared with County Council in a report presented in December of that year. A month later, staff submitted another report to Council with a proposed no-smoking policy and an implementation date of 1 April 2011. The policy prohibited tenants from smoking in private units, as well as on balconies, patios and within 5 m of windows and doorways. Existing tenants would be grandfathered. Overall, there was great support for the initiative; being a relatively small and rural county, councilors themselves had been receiving complaints from their constituents and understood that the problem of second-hand smoke infiltration was real.



Upon receiving the green light, staff had 3 months to prepare. The first order of business was to circulate a memo to all tenants informing them of the policy. In-service staff training was also undertaken. A tobacco enforcement officer from the Grey Bruce Health Unit attended the training to help clarify the limits of the *Smoke-Free Ontario Act* and what could be enforced under it versus what would need to be handled by housing staff.

In terms of BCHC's enforcement procedure, tenant complaints are followed up with visits or interviews, as well as with meetings with alleged offenders if complaints are deemed to have merit. BCHC wants to see people successfully comply with the policy; tenants are offered information, referrals to public health smoking cessation programs and other support services if they appear to be struggling. Landlord and Tenant Board eviction proceedings (under breach of reasonable enjoyment) are not initiated until a third complaint is received.

Bruce County's no-smoking policy has been in place now for almost 3 years. Housing Manager Christine MacDonald reports that staff buy-in has been favourable, with employees even bringing new ideas forward to help monitor compliance. However, she concedes that it has been a challenge for a few employees who find it difficult to report instances of non-compliance. Overall, tenant compliance has also been good. For the most recent six month period, there were 7 separate instances of non-compliance; one case required a second follow-up and one case went as far as an "N5" form (Notice to Terminate a Tenancy Early) being served. Staff will initiate a mediated agreement at the Landlord Tenant Board if the tenant is willing. There have also been a few instances of smoke-free stickers being removed from tenants' front doors. Tenants or those involved are given a warning that should the smoke-free signage be removed again BCHC would consider this willful damage and would issue a "tenant chargeback" to recoup expenses.

One of the more challenging aspects of the policy has been dealing with issues between tenants who are grandfathered and those who aren't. Enforcement is definitely an easier undertaking in their 100% smoke-free building, but nonetheless MacDonald states that policy implementation across the portfolio was "definitely worth it." Anecdotally, maintenance staff have reported units in better shape at turn-over—a great spin-off for a relatively small cost. At last count BCHC was 46% smoke-free and staff are continuing to encourage grandfathered tenants to sign lease addendums through tenant newsletters and at tenant meetings.

Congratulations Bruce County! For more information:

www.brucecounty.on.ca

519.396.3439