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COCHRANE DISTRICT SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION BOARD: Smoke-free April 1st is no joke!

The Cochrane District Social Services Administration Board (CDSSAB) is an organization that owns and manages 1,289 rent-geared-to-income units scattered throughout 12 municipalities in northeastern Ontario. In addition to its own portfolio, the CDSSAB also subsidizes 800 units of private non-profit housing and co-operative housing as well as another 106 privately-owned units. Health concerns raised by employees and service providers entering tenants' homes, as well as smoking-related property damage, had first put the idea of a smoke-free policy on the CDSSAB's radar. However, it was a presentation by the Region of Waterloo at the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association's annual conference, coupled with two smoking-related fires on CDSSAB property, that inspired staff to act.

The first steps, taken late in 2012, involved getting approval to start work on a policy from the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and the board. This was quickly achieved, as the board recognized the continued fire risk of the status quo, the cleaning and maintenance costs of smoking, as well as the negative health impacts on staff and tenants' health. Staff then began the work of researching and developing a policy and related procedures, taking advantage of resources and the experiences of other housing providers. The Porcupine Health Unit was able to offer support regarding local data on smoking and health statistics, and also worked with the CDSSAB to offer cessation information and support for tenants and applicants on the waitlist. It was decided that smoking would be prohibited in all units, on balconies and patios, and within 5 m of building entrances, exits or windows. Existing tenants would be grandfathered. A phased-in approach was chosen, beginning 1 April 2013 for apartments and 1 January 2014 for family units (townhomes, semi-detached and single homes).

Instead of mailing out surveys to tenants, the CDSSAB decided to reach out and solicit tenant input directly through personal phone calls. Although this approach removed anonymity, staff felt that the drawback would be outweighed by the benefits: greater tenant engagement, including those with low literacy skills, better overall understanding of the policy among tenants and therefore greater acceptance of it. Staff were proved right: an unbelievable 80% of tenants were surveyed, and their input informed the next phase of policy development.

A letter was sent to all tenants and waitlist applicants informing them of the new policy, and presentations were organized for each multi-unit building. The Cochrane DSSAB partners with Northern College at the beginning of each calendar year to bring students from the Pre-service firefighter program into their buildings to do fire prevention training with tenants. For 2013, staff paired smoke-free policy presentations with the fire prevention message, and even offered tenants the



opportunity to sign a smoke-free lease addendum on site. Further, staff went door to door in each of the CDSSAB's 10 buildings with lease addendums, having already identified tenants via the phone survey who had indicated interest in their units being designated as smoke-free. Approximately 130 tenants took advantage of the opportunity, and their addendums were later personally signed by the CAO. This was a small yet important gesture—it signaled to staff that the policy had support right from the top and was going to be taken seriously.

Next steps included creating metal signage for building entrances and stickers for tenants' front doors to distinguish which units were smoke-free. The CDSSAB wanted to maintain a positive message, positioning the policy as a healthy and welcoming feature for all tenants. It was decided to market the policy as "smoke-free" as opposed to "no smoking," avoiding signage with the usual red slash through a burning cigarette. The CDSSAB opted to use the Smoke-Free Housing Ontario logo and branded all policy-related communications for a consistent and positive look. Butt stops were purchased and positioned away from entrances, being respectful of where tenants tended to naturally gather to smoke. Carol Barber, CDSSAB program manager, emphasizes, "we are not telling our tenants not to smoke, that isn't the message. We are saying that our tenants cannot smoke in our units."

With respect to handling tenant complaints and enforcing the policy, staff investigate all complaints to gather information and to determine the merit of each one. If they feel that there is enough evidence to act, a community relations worker will give a verbal warning, preferably face to face, and a note is made in the tenant's file. A second complaint is handled with a written warning. Third complaints involve the tenant receiving a Landlord and Tenant Board "N5" form (Notice to Terminate a Tenancy Early), which is voidable if they correct their behaviour within 7 days. If a fourth complaint is made against the same tenant within 6 months of them receiving an N5, staff will issue a second N5 and pursue eviction. However, in the 10 months since the first phase of the policy has been in place, there has not been a situation in which the CDSSAB has had to go beyond the first step of a verbal warning.

The official launch of the policy, about a month after it went into effect, received positive press coverage and the CDSSAB marked the occasion with a cake. Overall, tenant reaction to the policy has been positive, and CDSSAB staff have been encouraging the private housing organizations under their agreements to follow suit. So far the City of Timmins Non-Profit Housing Corporation and the Iroquois Falls Senior's Housing Complex have both done so. On recent site visits to some of the CDSSAB's properties, upwards of a dozen tenants independently approached administration staff to thank them for the policy, describing how it has helped them cut down on the number of cigarettes they smoke per day. These tenants are no April Fools, and neither is the CDSSAB—everyone wins with a smoke-free policy.

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