

GREATER EDMONTON FOUNDATION HOUSING FOR SENIORS

The Greater Edmonton Foundation (GEF) Housing for Seniors is the largest provider of subsidized housing for low-income senior citizens in Alberta, with over 1,800 units in apartment buildings, duplex buildings and lodges. Mounting complaints about second-hand smoke, coupled with concerns about the health and safety of tenants and workers and the related damage to its properties, prompted the GEF Housing for Seniors to take steps towards becoming smoke-free in the majority of its buildings.

A residents' survey found that only 10% of the resident seniors smoked. Wanting to respect the rights of their current tenants and also provide a smoke-free option, the organization decided that their goal would be to gradually become 100% non-smoking by grandfathering current tenants who smoke.

The first step taken was to determine smokers by building, at which point a plan was drawn up and approved by the Board of Directors. To deal with elderly smokers, some buildings were identified where smoking would continue to be permitted in private suites. Other buildings were identified as being in transition to becoming smoke-free with grandfathered tenants. Tenants were given at least 6 months notice of the new policy, and in the spring of 2007 the plan was piloted at one apartment building and one lodge. The organization gave tenants the option of moving to a smoking building at their own cost. Some tenants simply quit smoking altogether. The lease was revised to reflect the no-smoking policy, and the Executive Director made a point of attending residents' meetings at every site to discuss the policy and to take questions.

Today, the vast majority of the organization's apartment buildings are non-smoking, with outdoor designated smoking areas. A couple of buildings have floors where smoking continues to be permitted in the private units. Of the 8 lodges offering supported living to the most elderly of tenants, smoking is not permitted in the private units in 6 of the buildings. Instead, the GEF Housing for Seniors has chosen to provide separately ventilated smoking lounges, which the organization feels is a safer option than having elderly seniors smoking in their own private rooms. One lodge continues to permit smoking in private units on designated floors.

Enforcement has not been as much of an issue as one might think. Executive Director Raymond Swonek states that their policy's success is a result of an integrated, open and honest communication strategy, and with the equal treatment of all tenants. Although he reports that they have had to evict a small handful of people based on non-compliance with their no-smoking policy, the organization only uses this as a last resort. Tenants are first given the option to move to another site. A legal challenge to their no-smoking policy that was to have gone before the provincial court in March 2009 was withdrawn.

In summary, the GEF Housing for Seniors reports that their most recent survey indicated no complaints related to their no-smoking policy. The organization has saved money in reduced room turnover costs, and their buildings are safer for tenants as well as staff. There continues to be a long waiting list for tenancy with the organization, so clearly the policy has not dissuaded prospective tenants.