

LEEDS GRENVILLE: “where lifestyle grows good business”

Nestled amid scenic lakes and breathtaking landscapes, and bordered to the south by the mighty St. Lawrence River, the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville is known for its historical and natural landmarks, including the Rideau Heritage Route Canal system, the Frontenac Arch World Biosphere Reserve and the 1000 Islands. Located approximately one hour south of Ottawa, the region of just under 100,000 people is comprised of 13 municipalities including the City of Brockville and the Towns of Prescott and Gananoque.

The Leeds and Grenville Housing Department has a portfolio of 667 rent-geared-to-income social housing units in 194 buildings scattered throughout the region: 179 single family units and 488 units in 15 multi-unit dwellings. The issue of tenant smoking and the possibility of implementing a no-smoking policy had been contemplated in previous years, but the timing had never been quite right. In 2011 the department rebuilt 2 duplexes that had fallen into disrepair and had been unoccupied for a number of years. Recognizing the opportunity to truly make a fresh start, human services staff submitted a report to the Counties' Joint Services Committee in October of that year, recommending that the properties be designated as smoke-free. The Committee not only accepted the recommendation, but also requested that the department consider expanding the policy to include all buildings in its portfolio.

Thus, in November 2011 human services staff initiated a tenant consultation process to solicit feedback on the idea of prohibiting smoking. Letters, along with a 13-question survey, were sent to all households, and case managers promoted the survey throughout their interactions with tenants. The survey sought to gain insight into tenants' opinions on, and experiences of, exposure to second-hand smoke (SHS) in their homes, health status, smoking status and behaviour, and their support for prohibiting smoking in some or all buildings. In consultation with the Leeds, Grenville & Lanark District Health Unit, a smoke-free housing Q & A resource was also created.¹ Information sessions co-facilitated by human services and public health staff were held at 13 of the department's 15 multi-unit apartment buildings, with invitations also extended to other tenants living nearby. This provided another opportunity for tenants to discuss the issue and to fill out the survey.

In total, 318 tenants (47%) completed the survey, which is an outstanding response rate.² Survey responses indicated that:

¹ http://www.leedsgrenville.com/en/live/resources/HS_SmokeFreeQA.pdf

² http://www.leedsgrenville.com/en/live/resources/HS_SmokeFreeSurveyResults.pdf

- The majority (59.7%) of tenants did not smoke, and 55% of all households prohibited smoking;
- Over a quarter (26.9%) reported regular exposure to SHS in their homes from other units; and
- Over a third (37.5%) reported health problems made worse by exposure.

Armed with this information, staff returned to the Joint Services Committee in May 2012 to report on their findings. Citing support from the majority of tenants, they recommended a no-smoking policy for the department's entire portfolio, including balconies and patios, as well as a 5 m buffer zone around windows, doors and air intakes of single, duplex and townhouse dwellings, and a 9 m buffer zone around apartments. Existing tenants would be grandfathered, but all new tenants, as well as internal transfers, would be required to sign the new lease effective 1 September 2012. The report indicated that prohibiting smoking would mitigate fire risk, and its immediate application to all units in the portfolio (as opposed to a phased-in approach) would both hasten the process to becoming 100% smoke-free as well as simplify management of the waiting list. The department would also save money on unit turn-overs, estimating \$600 more per unit to clean up where heavy smoking has taken place versus a smoke-free unit.

The recommendation was unanimously accepted and staff then had 3 months to adjust the lease and application form, communicate the policy to people on the centralized waiting list, prepare signage and train staff. Prospective tenants wishing to live in Leeds Grenville housing hear about the policy at least three times before they actually move in: in the application form, in the lease, and during the unit inspection with a case manager. The policy has now been in place for just over a year, and the Director of Human Services reports that compliance is high and that for instances of non-compliance, the department has successfully pursued mediation and been able to avoid eviction proceedings at the Landlord and Tenant Board. Case managers report that one of the hardest aspects of the policy to manage involves complaints from new tenants who smoke living near existing tenants who are grandfathered and thus permitted to continue smoking in their units. Happily, sensitivity on behalf of grandfathered tenants has been observed by staff: some go outside to smoke even when they don't have to.

Advice offered to other housing providers contemplating a similar no-smoking policy is to anticipate compliance—be prepared to accommodate crowds of people smoking outside! Plan ahead where designated smoking areas should be located, and budget for amenities like tables, outdoor ashtrays and shelters. For Leeds Grenville, policy adoption has been a positive experience—easier than expected, and with tangible results: better smelling hallways and a heightened awareness among tenants of smoking and its impact on the health and well-being of neighbours.

For more information: www.leedsgrenville.com or 613.342.3840