

Managing Smoke-Free Public Housing During the COVID-19 Outbreak

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted nearly every aspect of public housing, and HUD's Smoke-Free Public Housing Rule is no exception. High unemployment rates, social distancing, and stay-at-home orders mean public housing residents are spending more time at home and some residents may be smoking more due to stress or boredom. As a result, smoking violations at some PHAs have increased. COVID-19 also poses challenges to enforcement of the smoke-free rule because many PHA staff are working from home or working limited hours on site with limited in-person interactions with residents.

COVID-19 has also drawn attention to the importance of lung health and clean air. Decades of research show that smoking and secondhand smoke exposure impair the immune system and the lungs, both of which are critical to surviving COVID-19 infection. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people who smoke are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19.¹ Furthermore, experts suggest that secondhand smoke exposure could also increase the risk for COVID-19 infection.² People who live in federally assisted housing smoke at a rate much higher than the general population (34% and 14% respectively), putting them at greater risk.³

COVID-19 affects some groups of people, such as people who smoke, more than others. Many of the people in other high-risk categories for COVID-19 identified by the CDC also live in public housing. Thoughtfully managing a smoke-free housing policy during this outbreak will help protect these vulnerable populations by prioritizing both residents' health and housing.

Recommendations for PHA Staff



Promote Cessation

Some residents may be interested in quitting or cutting back on smoking or vaping to minimize their risk of complications related to COVID-19 infection. Quitting or cutting back can help residents comply with a smoke-free policy. Connect residents with free cessation resources such as the state quitline: 1-800-QUITNOW. Display cessation information in common areas and distribute to residents.⁴ Contact Clean Air for All for referrals to local and/or culturally specific cessation resources.



Promote Compliance

Maintaining a smoke-free environment is crucial during the COVID-19 outbreak. Remind residents about the building's smoke-free policy and include details about where smoking is and is not allowed. This can be accomplished with a policy reminder letter and smoke-free signage, for example.⁵

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-at-higher-risk.html>

² <https://graduatedivision.ucmerced.edu/news/2020/covid-19-more-likely-impact-smokers-and-people-exposed-secondhand-smoke-report-finds>

³ Helms, V. E., King, B. A., & Ashley, P. J. (2017). Cigarette smoking and adverse health outcomes among adults receiving federal housing assistance. *Preventive medicine*, 99, 171–177. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2017.02.001>

⁴ Visit www.smokefreepublichousingproject.org for downloadable cessation resources

⁵ A sample policy reminder letter and sample signs can be found in Clean Air for All's Compliance and Enforcement Toolkit or here: <http://smokefreepublichousingproject.org/enforcement.php>



Consider Changing the Smoke-Free Policy

HUD is providing waivers to PHAs that allow changes to policies within PHA plans, including smoke-free policies, without receiving Board approval through July 31, 2020. PHAs must still notify public housing residents of any impacts that policy changes may have on them as soon as practicable. This can be done by placing information on the PHA's website, leaving voice-mail messages for residents and additional follow-up communication.⁶ PHAs cannot suspend smoke-free policies and residents must smoke outdoors at least 25 feet from the building.⁷

Adapting the PHA's smoke-free policy could help residents comply with the policy and reduce their risk of losing their housing during the pandemic. For example, residents may avoid using designated smoking areas (DSAs) if they fear they cannot distance themselves enough from others. Adding more DSAs or allowing residents to smoke anywhere outside of 25 feet from the building might make it easier for residents to follow the policy without increasing their risk of contracting the virus. PHAs could also consider changing their graduated enforcement plan to include more steps.⁸ Doing so offers residents more opportunities to comply and reduces their risk of losing their housing.



Handling Smoking Violations

Many residents will experience significant COVID-19 related stress such as the loss of a job, distance learning for children, social isolation, and/or care for a sick family member. For many people who smoke, stress can trigger nicotine cravings. If a resident struggles to comply with the smoke-free policy, use a personalized approach to help that person comply. This could include an in-person meeting (6 feet apart) or a remote meeting to discuss barriers to compliance, sharing tips and tools for managing cravings, or connecting the resident with cessation support and other resources that could reduce stress related to COVID-19. Always document and follow up on smoking complaints in a timely and consistent manner.



Keep Residents Housed

Keeping residents housed is a high priority during the COVID-19 outbreak. Everyone deserves a healthy and safe place to take shelter from this deadly virus. For this reason, some states have placed restrictions on evictions.⁹ HUD has prohibited evictions for nonpayment of rent.¹⁰ Know the current laws around eviction in your state but focus your attention on helping residents comply with the smoke-free policy, connecting residents with cessation resources, and using your graduated enforcement plan.

For smoke-free public housing resources and assistance, contact Clean Air for All:

Email: info@smokefreepublichousingproject.org

Phone: 651-646-3005

Website: www.smokefreepublichousingproject.org

⁶ <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/PIH2020-05.pdf>

⁷ https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/COVID19_FAQ_PIH_3-30-20.pdf

⁸ A sample graduated enforcement plan can be found in Clean Air for All's Compliance and Enforcement Toolkit or here: <http://smokefreepublichousingproject.org/enforcement.php> ("Promoting Smoke-Free Policy Compliance")

⁹ <https://evictionlab.org/covid-policy-scorecard/>

¹⁰ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11320>