

Boston Housing Authority pushes for smoke-free housing

Ban in Boston could be nation's largest

By Jenifer B. McKim, Globe Staff | July 27, 2010

Meena Carr figured out years ago why her young grandson, Malik, was chronically coughing and wheezing: Her home made him sick. Carr, 69, didn't smoke cigarettes, but some of her neighbors in the Washington-Beech housing development did, often in the hallway. The smell permeated Carr's apartment.

Last month, Washington-Beech in Roslindale became the city's first smoke-free public housing development. Today, Carr plans to join other community leaders, public officials, and housing advocates to discuss the Boston Housing Authority's more ambitious long-term objective — clearing the air by 2013 at all 64 public housing developments.

That positions Boston to become the first city in Massachusetts, and perhaps the largest housing authority nationwide, to impose such a ban. Under the proposal, still in its initial stages, about 27,000 residents in 12,000 units would be prohibited from smoking in common areas and their own apartments.

“This new initiative will go a long way to encourage more healthy living styles for our residents,” said Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who earlier this year unveiled the plan to make housing developments smoke free. “You don't live in a single-family home, you are in multiunit housing,” Menino said. “What you do there has an effect on all other folks living in that building.”

Today's meeting at Suffolk University is being billed by officials as a “summit” to launch the campaign. Details, including how a ban would be phased in and how violators would be punished, are still unclear. Housing officials say the process will include community debate and a public comment period. By January, they hope to submit a proposal to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Nationwide, about 170 public housing authorities — roughly 5 percent — have instituted some kind of no-smoking policy in the past few years, according to the Smoke-Free Environments Law Project in Michigan, a nonprofit that tracks the issue. But so far none as large as Boston's has implemented the ban, making the city a leader if it moves more quickly than other authorities of similar size.

Jonathan Winickoff, a pediatrician at MassGeneral Hospital for Children, said a ban on smoking in public housing developments would be a natural expansion of a six-year-old state rule that forbids smoking in workplaces, including restaurants and bars.

“People know that smoke doesn’t stop at the doorway. It travels through the air ducts, the hallways, along the electrical routes to contaminate every unit in a building,” Winickoff said. “This is bringing the multiunit housing world online with common sense health and safety standards.”

The housing authority says a poll it conducted this spring found a smoking ban has widespread support among public housing development residents with families. Of 1,300 people surveyed, 92 percent said they favor smoke-free housing, while only 8 percent objected, according to the housing authority.

But that level of support was not necessarily reflected in comments made by residents last week at Washington-Beech, which is halfway through a \$100 million project to transform a sea of aging red-brick apartment buildings into a neighborhood of pastel-colored townhouses.

“You should be able to smoke where you live,” said Andrea Venable, 29, through the screen door of a townhouse she shares with her 12-year-old daughter and mother. Venable said that to move into the unit, she had to sign an agreement not to smoke anywhere on the grounds.

Another resident, Julie Silva, 40, said there already was too much regulation of residents’ lives before the smoking ban. Silva, who has emphysema, said she would like to smoke on her front steps, although she wants to eventually quit.

Boston’s plan had its beginnings 10 years ago, when housing officials tried to figure out what was causing high incidences of asthma and other respiratory diseases among public housing residents. Eventually, they focused on second-hand smoking as a cause.

Last October, the housing authority debuted 14 smoke-free units at the Franklin Hill public housing development in Dorchester as a pilot project. Washington-Beech followed in June. Residents there had to agree to refrain from smoking in their homes and common areas. Violators can face “immediate termination” of their lease, according to the regulations.

While the city has not yet determined a specific policy for dealing with violations, housing officials said the process likely would be similar to an eviction process and include a lengthy appeals period.

Officials said they realize it will be difficult for some residents to give up smoking and will, in some cases, take into consideration extenuating circumstances. For example, elderly or disabled residents unable to leave their homes might be granted waivers from the rule.

The city will also launch outreach and education efforts, including smoking cessation programs.

“We want to give some comfort to people who are nervous about this policy that we are going to be working on all sides of this issue,” said Kate Bennett, the BHA’s special assistant to the administrator for planning. “A lot of people think we are trying to evict smokers. We are trying to create healthy housing.”

Officials also said they do not expect any legal roadblocks to a smoking ban.

The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development last summer stated that it “strongly encourages” public housing authorities to create no-smoking policies in at least some of their housing units. The message dispelled concerns among owners of multiunit buildings that they would be charged with discrimination if they prohibited smoking, said Jim Bergman, director of the Smoke-Free Environments Law Project. The project is part of the Center for Social Gerontology in Michigan, a nonprofit research and advocacy group.

“There’s never been a legal challenge to a smoke-free policy in a housing situation,” said Bergman. “There is not a right to smoke.”

And the smoke-free movement is not limited to public housing. A growing number of privately developed apartment and condominium complexes already have smoking bans in place, including the luxury 241-unit Archstone Avenir in Boston, which opened in March.

Sally Matheu, Archstone group vice president, said the company wanted to promote healthy living and avoid complaints about second-hand smoke. It is the first smoke-free building in the company’s national portfolio of 81,354 units.

“We decided we would take a chance,” Matheu said. “It’s been a huge success.”

At Washington-Beech, Carr also is seeing the benefits of the smoking ban — since it took effect in June, her grandson’s health has already improved.

“We have to educate people on the effects of smoking on nonsmokers,” said Carr, who pushed to get cigarettes snuffed out at the complex. “We have to give them a way to help themselves.”

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