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Smoke-free housing – a smokin’ hot issue?

Vancouver, BC – May 29, 2014 - YES, say smoke-free housing advocates that include the BC Lung Association, the Heart and Stroke Foundation (B.C. & Yukon), supported by partners including the Condominium Homeowners Association and Landlord BC.

So eager are they to see more multi-unit property owners and managers implementing 100 percent smoke-free policies, they’ve made June Smoke-Free Housing Month.

Fueling the issue is that more and more British Columbians are living in multi-unit housing, whether for reasons of affordability, down-sizing or personal choice. Today over 45 percent of British Columbians live in apartments and condos and second-hand smoke is a BIG problem.

“People today are less tolerant of smoking and more conscious of the importance of breathing clean air,” says Jack Boomer, consultant to the BC Lung Association and Heart and Stroke Foundation of B.C. & Yukon. “BC families want to live in healthier, smoke-free environments, but for those who live in apartments and condos, 100 percent smoke-free options are scarce.”

Even if smoking is restricted to a person’s apartment, the smoke easily travels through ventilation systems, electrical outlets, under doors and through open windows into the surrounding units.

While BC already has laws that regulate smoking in workplaces, public places and residential building common areas (e.g. lobbies, corridors and laundries), these laws do not apply to people’s private spaces.

And despite the fact that no-smoking policies and bylaws are legal in BC, few buildings have opted in.

The BC Lung Association and the Heart and Stroke Foundation of B.C. & Yukon are keen to move the issue forward, particularly given the increasing number of weekly complaints they receive from residents who feel helpless about smoke entering their homes from neighbouring units.

They say complaints tend to spike during the summer months when more people are spending time outdoors – and more people are smoking on their balconies. And this means a subsequent spike in resident complaints of second-hand smoke.

A 2013 Angus Reid survey of residents living in BC condos and apartments found that one-half had experienced second-hand smoke entering their homes from neighbouring units. The same survey confirmed the majority would prefer to live in a 100 percent smoke-free building.

“Frankly, we’re stumped. We don’t understand why more landlords and property managers/owners have not leveraged their legal right to make their buildings entirely smoke-free,” continues Boomer.

“We believe the scarcity of smoke-free housing options will continue to become a bigger issue and the promise of “smoke-free living” a greater marketing advantage for those who choose to take the lead.”

“A smoke-free building is desirable, can lessen headaches for property managers, reduce risk of fire, reduce clean-up costs, and for owners - make units easier to sell when the time comes,” he adds.

“The issue merits attention. Second-hand smoke is a common concern in a strata corporation,” agrees Tony Gioventu, Executive Director of the Condominium Home Owners Association. “Without a clear enforceable bylaw, nuisance issues such as smoke can be difficult to resolve.

“Strata Corporations are encouraged to inform and educate themselves on the effect of second hand smoke in residential spaces. We recommend that any interested strata should seek advice on the options for adopting bylaws that promote smoke-free housing,” says Gioventu.

Given the short supply of smoke-free housing options in BC, the Lung Association and the Heart and Stroke Foundation are working with leading stakeholders in the multi-housing sector to educate housing providers on the benefits of going smoke-free, highlight the success of those who already have – and encourage others to follow their lead.

For information and tools on how to make your building smoke-free visit: www.smokefreehousingbc.ca.

The website is managed by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of BC & Yukon and the BC Lung Association, and is guided by a committee of multi-unit housing stakeholders and partners interested in increasing the availability of smoke-free homes for those that want and need to live smoke-free.