

Chicago, public housing agencies to implement federal smoking ban

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Karen Johnson dreads the idea of standing in the snow for a drag of her cigarette. She smokes from the comfort of her Dearborn Homes apartment, and has done so since moving into public housing in 1995.

But with a federal smoking ban looming, Johnson, 59, will have to trek to a sidewalk at least 25 feet from her building or quit smoking. She can't afford to leave public housing but wonders if she can ever truly give up tobacco.

The federal rule, announced Nov. 30 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, will require all public housing agencies to go smoke-free by June 2018.

The rule prohibits tobacco products — cigarettes, cigars, pipes and hookahs — in living units, indoor common areas, administrative offices and outdoors within 25 feet of housing and administrative office buildings. Although electronic-cigarettes are not explicitly banned, HUD encourages individual public housing agencies to "exercise their discretion" in their smoke-free policies.

The city of Chicago updated its Clean Indoor Air Act in 2014 to include e-cigarettes. The law prohibits smoking within 15 feet of the entrance of any building where smoking is not allowed.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HUD's national smoke-free policy will save public housing agencies \$153 million every year in repairs and preventable fires, including \$94 million in secondhand smoke-related health care, \$43 million in renovation of smoking-permitted units and \$16 million in smoking-related fire losses.

"Every child deserves to grow up in a safe, healthy home free from harmful secondhand cigarette smoke," HUD Secretary Julian Castro said in a statement. "HUD's smoke-free rule is a reflection of our commitment to using housing as a platform to create healthy communities."

[Chicago Housing Authority](#), the nation's third largest public housing agency, has piloted smoke-free policies at 11 of its 102 developments since 2011, including in one of 16 buildings that comprise Dearborn Homes.

But the majority of Dearborn residents are able to smoke inside their apartments, including Johnson, who said she was not aware of the upcoming national ban until a Tribune reporter asked her about it.

"I've enjoyed smoking for many, many years. I still smoke as we speak but my way of life is to always support whatever is positive, whether it works for me or against me. So I'll be for (the smoking ban) all the way."

Johnson said she hopes the ban will help her quit and deter children from picking up the habit.

"I know that I have a trace of [lung cancer](#) as we speak, and I still have a pull on a cigarette. It's the hardest thing ever," Johnson said.

At least 15 of 109 public housing agencies in Illinois have instituted smoke-free policies for some or all tenants to date.

Once fully implemented, HUD's smoke-free policy will affect more than 76,600 people living in 52,793 housing units throughout Illinois.

CHA oversees about 21,000 of those housing units, which are occupied by more than 32,000 people citywide, according to CHA spokesman Matthew Aguilar. He said the housing authority is "looking at all of the resources available as we develop a comprehensive implementation plan in 2017" but would not elaborate on how it plans to enforce or implement the ban.

Aguilar said the goal is not to force evictions.

"Many of the details have yet to be finalized. However, we will work to ensure that the new HUD rules will not adversely impact CHA residents or result in punitive actions," he said in an emailed statement.

Technical assistance

The cost of enforcing and implementing the policy may total as much as \$30 million in the first year, according to HUD. Recurring costs are estimated at \$7.7 million a year.

There is no federal budget allocated to implement the rule. HUD can commit only to providing "technical assistance" in the form of online tool kits that consist of brochures, pamphlets and other tobacco research to more than 3,100 public housing agencies across the country, HUD spokeswoman Gina Rodriguez said.

"With the transition of the administration, right now, we're just committed to providing the guidance, the technical assistance to see this through and kind of best practices and what has worked in other communities," she said. "But that's all we can commit to at this point."

HUD will rely on individual public housing agencies to develop their own strategies, she said.

Rodriguez said enforcement strategies will gradually develop as new leases are signed because "new expectations are clear up front and legally binding through the new lease agreements." The rule's 18-month time frame will help the development and implementation of new policies and procedures, she said, because most leases are about 12 months long.

Maintenance checks

Like many former smokers, Etta Davis says quitting tobacco is the hardest thing she's ever had to do.

The 62-year-old Dearborn Homes resident volunteers for tenant patrols each month to help lower her rent and keep busy. She said the job entails walks through the buildings for maintenance checks and making sure no one is standing in the hallways.

Davis said before the public housing project was refurbished, halls were crowded with people buying and selling drugs. She's worried that HUD's smoking ban will push people back to the hallways to sneak drags and litter the building with cigarette butts.

"They had people coming from the West Side, the suburbs and everywhere to buy the drugs that they had down here," she said. "You really had to basically say 'excuse me' to get past and some of the drug dealers would be disrespecting some of the residents ... and now you don't have that."

Davis said many residents are going to need smoking cessation classes if they want to follow the rules and keep their apartments.

"I know people down here are going to have a problem with it because everybody that I usually talk to are smokers down here," she said. "You kind of feel like you're in jail because you have to follow all these different rules and orders. But you have to do what you have to do to keep your apartment."

Ahead of the pack

The Housing Authority of Cook County, the second largest public housing agency in Illinois, went smoke-free in December 2015. It oversees 108 communities, as well as unincorporated areas in suburban Cook County.

"We're serving a population that is not only low-income but, in many cases, have health issues," said Richard Monocchio, executive director of the county housing authority. "So just from a human perspective, we thought that even though there might be some initial shock to it and some growing pains, it was the right thing to do."

Before the ban, Monocchio said many nonsmoking residents were overwhelmed by the smell of cigarette smoke that traveled through the air vents and made it difficult for some senior residents to breathe.

He said the agency surveyed about 1,900 households about a potential smoking ban in 2014. Only 50 percent of residents responded to the survey and nearly 60 percent of them said they supported the ban.

Monocchio said the agency established designated smoking areas away from the buildings that are in compliance with HUD's smoking ban.

"It isn't like there is an overwhelming outcry of people who are fighting it. That just really hasn't been the case. We have designated smoking areas outside of the buildings, so if somebody really has to smoke, there's a place to do it," he said.

The county housing authority partnered with the Cook County Department of Public Health during the implementation process to provide tobacco cessation programs and resources.

While it's "not easy" to police residents' private behavior, Monocchio said most people comply with the rules.

"Subsidized housing is something that a lot of people need but not a lot of people have," he said. "In many cases, it's the reason they have a roof over their heads. So most people aren't going to risk losing that. We are going to be tested. But we're going to deal with it humanely."

Tammie Montgomery, 52, a resident of Juniper Towers in Park Forest, said she quit smoking in February before moving into the county public housing development.

She had made several attempts to quit over the past 30 years but finally had her last drag in September 2015. The building's smoking ban has kept her on track, she said.

"Cigarettes kill people. I've lost a lot of people in my family to cancer from cigarettes," Montgomery said. "I really felt like I had hit a home run when I moved in because sometimes you slip up. But this time, I really stopped. Being in a smoke-free building ... I'm a person who follows rules."

Montgomery said her neighbors also follow the rules and retreat to the designated smoking areas when they need a smoke break.

"It's had a pretty good effect," she said. "Maybe some of them have a desire to quit and maybe this will help them and encourage them to quit."

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