

Smoke-Free Environments Law Project

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Smoke-Free Multi-Unit Housing Came of Age in 2007

"2007 will be known as the year that smoke-free multi unit housing came of age in Michigan and North America," according to Jim Bergman, Co-Director of The Center for Social Gerontology, Inc. in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which operates the Smoke-Free Environments Law Project (SFELP). "In the past few years, there had been a slow and steady increase in the number of apartment buildings that were totally smoke-free," he said, "but in 2007 this became a virtual tidal wave with thousands upon thousands of smoke-free apartment units becoming available. Owners and operators of market-rate, affordable and public housing apartment buildings all began adopting smoke-free policies in dramatically increasing numbers in 2007."

According to Bergman, "prior to 2005, smoke-free apartments in Michigan were almost impossible to find. Today, there are tens of thousands of smoke-free apartment units in communities all across the state." Many of those apartments can be located by going to SFELP's MISmokeFreeApartment.org listing at <http://www.MISmokeFreeApartment.org/listing.html>

Apartment Owners Know Its Legal & Cost-Efficient to be Smoke-Free

Until the MISmokeFreeApartment initiative began in mid-2004, most landlords in Michigan thought it was against the law to make their apartment buildings smoke-free and include no-smoking clauses in their rental leases. Once apartment owners realized it was legal to make their apartments totally smoke-free, they began to transition their buildings to smoke-free status.

Apartment owners understand the high maintenance costs associated with having smokers in their units, including cigarette burn marks, nicotine and tar-stained walls, and carpets that reek of tobacco smoke. They also know the dangers of cigarette-caused fires. Plus, now that only about 20% of adults smoke, they see that the market niche for smoke-free apartments is enormous.

2007 Sees Burst in Smoke-Free Apartments: Big, Small, Market Rate, & Affordable

"In 2007, large and small apartment owners in Michigan and across North American saw the value of offering smoke-free buildings as an amenity that appealed to health-conscious consumers and boosted owners' bottom line," said Bergman.

Large apartment management companies adopting smoke-free policies included: First Centrum, based in Virginia, with about 50 buildings and 5,500 units in 6 states, including 15 buildings in Michigan; Guardian Management, based in Oregon, with over 150 properties in 7 states, which adopted a smoke-free policy for about 8,000 units, effective January 1, 2008; Prometheus Real Estate Group, based in the San Francisco Bay area, with over 18,000 housing units in California and the Pacific Northwest, in November adopted a smoke-free policy for all its new multi-family development communities; Globe General, based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, with about 60 apartment buildings in Manitoba with about 10,000 tenants adopted a smoke-free policy for all new tenants as of Oct. 1st; and Corcoran Management, based in Boston and serving New England, is opening Parkside Commons in 2008 as a 100% smoke-free building in Chelsea, MA.

Dave Watkins, Chairman of the Board of the National Apartment Association, is quoted in the December issue of UNITS magazine as saying "Smoke-free apartment communities not only promote a healthy resident population, but also a healthy bottom line for owners and investors." The cover, feature section of the December UNITS magazine is on "Clearing the Air: Industry Discusses Trend Toward Smoke-Free Housing", in which the editors introduce this feature by stating: "In this new era, many owners and managers are choosing not to ignore the problems that can result from a smoke-friendly community. They are finding that keeping the smoke out is the best way to retain both residents and profits."

"Just as there has been a dramatic increase in smoke-free privately-owned multi-unit housing, the number of local public housing authorities in the United States with smoke-free policies has exploded. Prior to 2005, about 12 local public housing authorities in the U.S. had adopted smoke-free policies for one or more of their apartment buildings. As of December, 2007, at least 65 local housing authorities had adopted smoke-free policies for some or all of their apartment buildings," stated Bergman, "with about 45 being adopted in the last 48 months." States with such policies include Michigan (24), Maine (13), Minnesota (10), Nebraska (3), Washington (4), California (3 - 4), Wisconsin, Oregon, Florida, Idaho, Montana, Indiana and New Jersey.

The first smoke-free policy adopted in public housing in Michigan was in July, 2005 by the Cadillac Housing Commission. Since January, 2006, 23 more local housing commissions in Michigan have adopted smoke-free policies covering almost 3,400 apartment units; an average of one housing commission per month adopting a policy.

"This spectacular increase in smoke-free policies resulted from housing authority directors and boards realizing that it was legal to have smoke-free policies, and from a desire to protect the health of all residents from the dangers of secondhand smoke and from cigarette-caused fires. The smoke-free policies also dramatically reduce maintenance costs when smokers move out and their apartment units have to be refurbished for new tenants. The cost savings can be well over \$2,000 to \$6,000 per unit," Bergman said.

"Smoke-free policies are also being adopted in other subsidized 'affordable' housing by many multi-unit development and management companies, ranging from for-profit to non-profit entities," Bergman noted. "These subsidized buildings have a variety of public financing, including HUD Section 8 and related subsidies, local or state tax incentives, and other state or local financing. The apartment buildings generally have some or all of the units at reduced rents for low- to moderate-income tenants, especially for the elderly and/or disabled."

Private developers and management companies comprise a major proportion of "affordable" housing operators, but other operators include religious-affiliated groups and community organizations. Michigan has well over 3,000 units of smoke-free privately-operated "affordable" housing, largely for elderly and/or disabled persons. In the Kalamazoo, Michigan area, the Sisters of St. Joseph adopted a smoke-free policy for their 76-unit elderly/disabled Dillon Hall apartment building in April, 2005. Jewish Apartments & Services, located in Michigan, has 6 buildings and over 800 units that are smoke-free. Likewise, Lutheran Social Services agencies adopted a smoke-free policy for one of their Marquette, Michigan apartment buildings in May, 2006 and another in the Lansing area in 2007.

The Trend is Clear: Smoke-Free Multi-Unit Housing is the Wave of the Future

Bergman concluded by saying: "While those of us working to increase the numbers of apartment buildings and condominiums with smoke-free policies had seen some progress in recent years, no one could have predicted the enormous growth in smoke-free multi-unit buildings that we've witnessed in 2007. Media coverage has also sky-rocketed with all the major media running stories about smoke-free multi-unit housing this year, and with hundreds of newspaper, TV and radio reports. The trend is clear, smoke-free multi-unit housing is the wave of the future, and the future is now."

The increase in smoke-free multi-unit housing is also being spurred by health groups who understand the health dangers of secondhand smoke to all people, but especially to children, the elderly and others with respiratory diseases such as asthma and emphysema. Smoke-free multi-unit housing initiatives are currently being conducted in over 30 states, including Michigan, Maine, Minnesota, Utah, Maryland, Oregon, Washington, California, New Jersey, Colorado, Ohio, New York, Iowa, Indiana, Alaska, Hawaii, Nebraska, Idaho, Montana, Massachusetts and others. Such initiatives have also been undertaken in Canada nationally and in some of the provinces, including Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta.

To access the MISmokeFreeApartment web site to learn more, go to <http://www.mismokefreeapartment.org> To access the Michigan smoke-free apartment listing directly, go to <http://www.mismokefreeapartment.org/listing.html> For more on smoke-free apartments, go to the SFELP "apartments" site at <http://www.tcsg.org/sfelp/apartment.htm> which also has links to related sites.
