

Building Partnerships for Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing in Wichita

UNNECESSARY LOSS

Around 1:30 AM on a cold February night, firefighters were called to a fire at Parklane Alley Apartments in Wichita, Kansas. Smoke and toxic gases filled the hallways, firefighters had to use ladders to evacuate some of the people from windows and balconies.

Thankfully, no lives were lost but four people were injured, one critically. According to Wichita Fire Department Captain Stuart Bevis, the building suffered \$150,000 in damage with another \$50,000 lost in the contents of the apartments.

What was the cause of the fire? An ashtray accidentally knocked over in a ground level apartment. Smoldering cigarettes from the ashtray started the initial fire that quickly turned into a blaze.

The fire, the property damage, the injuries to residents - it all could have been prevented if people weren't smoking inside the apartments. That is one of the reasons why the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative is helping Wichita property managers and residents make their buildings smokefree.

REACHING OUT

When the American Lung Association of the Plains-Gulf Region partnered with Tobacco-Free Wichita to create the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative in 2012, there were a dozen complexes with smokefree policies out of the approximately 230 multi-unit complexes in Wichita.

According to Beth Marolf, of the American Lung Association of the Plains Gulf Region, an early goal of the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative was to expand their network, they invited partners from multiple sectors to join them.



The Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative meeting with property managers and owners

Representatives from insurance agencies, the fire department, tenants and owners/property managers all joined the community leadership team. Marolf says the property managers offered important advice.

“When we started we were all going at it from the health perspective. One of our managers on the community leadership team said, you know, I care about the health of tenants, but I’m most interested in the bottom line. That was an a-ha moment for us. Not that we can ignore the health message but that it can’t be our only message.” - Beth Marolf.

John Shaft, operations manager of the 194-unit Quarters Community, echoed the value of economic message.

“When you renovate a unit that has been smoked in for a length of time, you virtually have to strip that unit down and go to the bare walls. You repaint everything. You get rid of all your carpets. The labor is intensified dramatically; the materials required to refurbish are more.” - John Shaft



BUILDING A BASELINE

Of all the relationships Marolf has helped to build, she is most proud of the partnership between the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative group and the Apartment Association of Greater Wichita. The Initiative was invited to present at the Apartment Association's tradeshow.

The Apartment Association also provided a valuable resource. They shared their mailing list. The list allowed the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative to survey all the local multi-unit properties.

“The assessment was a lot of work but it was invaluable. It gave us baseline data to help us plan our work. It showed us which properties were interested in implementing a smokefree policy.” - Beth Marolf

MOVING TO ACTION

With the baseline data complete, the American Lung Association of the Plains Gulf Region applied for and received a grant from the American Lung Association National Office to continue the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative. The grant allowed them to provide signs and banners for properties as well as advertising to raise awareness and educate amongst tenants on the dangers of secondhand smoke.

Grant funds were also used to facilitate a series of three education sessions for property owners and managers. The first session focused on economic benefits, an insurance agent discussed how a smokefree policy can lower insurance rates.

The next session focused on logistics, the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative presented a toolkit that included sample leases and a six-month implementation timeline. The toolkit was inspired by the American Lung Association Smokefree Housing toolkit.



The toolkit and additional materials the Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative shared with property managers and owners.

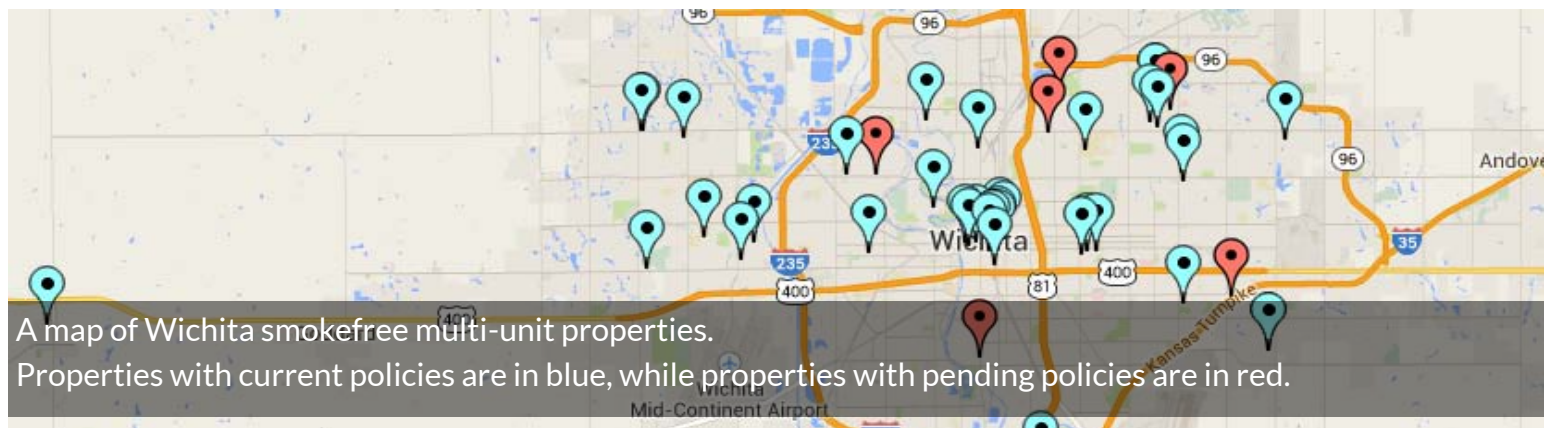
The final education session featured a panel of managers and owners who had already implemented a smokefree policy. The majority said implementation was easier than expected. Several managers on the panel mentioned that being smokefree had become a marketing tool.

“I think (the final educational session) was the most effective meeting. These are the people in the trenches doing it. I can say it all day long but I’m not an owner, I’m not a manager, I can’t answer all of those questions about enforcement and penalties.” - Beth Marolf

PRESENT & FUTURE SUCCESS

The Smokefree Multi-Unit Housing Initiative started with a dozen smokefree Wichita properties in 2012 and as of January 1, 2015, that had grown to 39 smokefree properties. Additional properties are committed to going smokefree at a future date.

“This was hard work upfront but once we started to get people signed up, it felt like we couldn’t turn around without finding another landlord that wanted to go smokefree.” - Beth Marolf



A map of Wichita smokefree multi-unit properties. Properties with current policies are in blue, while properties with pending policies are in red.