

Creating Healthier Communities: Housing Partners of Western Nebraska Goes Smoke-Free

The Challenge: Secondhand Smoke and Public Housing

In recent years, the harmful effects of secondhand smoke and tobacco litter have become increasingly evident; especially in multi-unit housing where smoke can easily travel between apartments and harm non-smokers. Housing Partners of Western Nebraska (HPWN), which oversees public housing units in communities in Scotts Bluff County, Gordon, and Chappell, recognized this growing concern. Although a

2017 federal rule from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) required all public housing units to go smoke-free indoors, HPWN leadership realized it wasn't enough. Cigarette litter remained common on lawns and sidewalks, and smoke drifting from doorways was still sparking complaints from neighboring tenants.

Given HPWN's mission to provide safe, clean housing for all—including families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities—it was clear that further steps were needed to protect residents' well-being and maintain a healthier living environment.



The Intervention: Expanding Smoke-Free Policies Beyond the Unit



HPWN expanded its smoke-free policy to include not only the interiors of public housing units, but also the surrounding properties. Residents of 162 units are now required to smoke off property, ensuring that tobacco use does not affect nearby neighbors or the shared community environment.

To support this change, HPWN led a transparent and inclusive process:

- **Public Hearings:** Residents were informed of the proposed changes and invited to a public hearing to ask questions and voice feedback.
- **Community Meetings:** HPWN hosted an evening meeting to explain the new policy and distribute educational materials.
- **Collaboration with Public Health:** HPWN partnered with Panhandle Public Health District (PPHD) to provide free quit-smoking resources, ensuring that residents who wished to quit had access to support without financial burden.

Staff also played a vital role. Maintenance teams, often the first to notice property issues, were trained to help monitor and support compliance in a positive, relationship-driven way.

Outcomes: Cleaner Communities and Fewer Complaints

Since implementing the expanded smoke-free policy, HPWN has seen a notable decrease in tobacco-related complaints. The shift has improved neighbor relations and drastically reduced cigarette litter on properties. Residents now enjoy cleaner outdoor spaces and fewer conflicts related to secondhand smoke exposure.



“Smoking-related complaints have virtually been eliminated,” said the HPWN CEO Anita Doggett. “There (also) hasn’t been much push back about the new policy. Over the years, smoking has become less socially accepted and more and more people understand the harm smoking can cause bystanders and loved ones as well.”

The initiative didn’t just reduce complaints; it reinforced HPWN’s core values of promoting long-term tenant success and healthy living environments. Today, HPWN sees its smoke-free properties as an asset, not a barrier, and plans to highlight this in future housing advertisements.

Lessons Learned: The Power of Transparency and Support

One of the biggest challenges HPWN faced was addressing the perception that the policy restricted personal freedoms. By emphasizing that tenants were still allowed to smoke—just not on property—and by offering tools to help quit, the team was able to shift the conversation toward community health and mutual respect.

Key takeaways for others considering a similar shift:

- **Involve residents early:** Open forums and Q&A sessions help ease concerns and encourage collaboration.
- **Offer resources:** Partner with local public health groups to provide quitting support and education.
- **Empower your team:** Maintenance staff and day-to-day personnel are crucial in reinforcing new norms and supporting tenants.

Looking ahead, HPWN hopes to eventually expand the policy to all properties under its umbrella. Smoke-free housing is no longer seen as a limitation—it’s a step toward safer, cleaner, and more respectful living for all.