



Smokers in North Jersey unfazed by proposed HUD public housing ban

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New Jersey already requires common areas in residential buildings to be smoke free, but a proposal announced Thursday by the federal government would snuff out smoking inside and outside public housing complexes, including apartments.

The plan already has support from advocates and smoking and non-smoking tenants of the public housing in North Jersey who cited the health hazards of secondhand smoke as a great reason to expand the ban.

"This is making great strides to protect all people from secondhand smoke and 'thirdhand' smoke," said Karen Blumenfeld, executive director at Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy. "It's impacting not only the tenants residing in that unit at that point in time, but tenants that will be residing in the unit in the future."

"Thirdhand" smoke refers to the residue left on inside surfaces that mixes with common household pollutants.

But there were some opponents of the proposal who said that such a ban would infringe on the rights of smokers.

"You should be able to do what you want in your house," said Mae Ray, 59, who lives at the Chestnut Gardens complex in Passaic.

The proposed rule, by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, would require each public housing agency to implement a smoke-free policy in all living units, indoor common areas and administrative office buildings on public housing property. The policy would also extend to all outdoor areas up to 25 feet from the housing and administrative office building.

"HUD proposes implementation of smoke-free public housing to improve indoor air quality in the housing, benefit the health of public housing residents and staff, reduce the risk of catastrophic fires, and lower overall maintenance costs," reads the proposed rule.

Blumenfeld said the policy would benefit tenants who are concerned about secondhand smoke while outdoors and smoke coming into their private windows, balcony or private living area.

The New Jersey Smoke-Free Air Act, which took effect in 2006, prohibits smoking in any indoor public place and workplace, and in schools. The law also prohibits smoking in common areas of residential buildings, such as hallways, lobbies, stairwells and elevators.

Four years after the law took effect, an amendment was passed, which banned the use of electronic smoking devices — “e-cigarettes” — in indoor public places and workplaces.

Blumenfeld said she hoped the proposed federal rule included those devices as well.

“Hookah and electronic smoking devices were not mentioned necessarily as being included, but we are hoping to provide comments on that so that it’s a completely smoke-free environment for people,” she said. “It would make sense to have that included.”

Smoking is already banned in about 20 percent of the nation’s federally subsidized housing. HUD wants to extend that to the other 940,000 units around the country, in such cities as New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Miami.

Hackensack, which is home to six public housing facilities, already prohibits smoking inside some buildings.

Diane Ratto, who has lived in Oratam Court for a decade, said she has seen residents who have been evicted from their apartments after being caught smoking several times. Ratto, a non-smoker, said she supported the ban citing the health hazards.

“When a person comes to visit and they want to smoke we send them out to the street to smoke,” she said.

Linda Brown, who lives in Dizenzo Court, a public housing building for seniors on Beech Street, said she also liked to have the smoke-free environment. Brown, who moved to the building in June, said the secondhand smoke could be dangerous for those who suffer from asthma and other breathing disorders.

“I’m not against smoking as long as it’s done where it should be, where it’s allocated to be done,” she said. “People who have health issues shouldn’t have to inhale other people’s smoke.”

But another woman, who lives at Oratam Court in Hackensack, and only gave her first name, Karina, said although she understood the hazards of second-hand smoke, she opposed any restrictions on smoking in the home.

“I think it’s pushing it too much to tell people what they can and cannot do in their homes,” said Karina, who said she’s a non-smoker. “They’ll start with smoking and next thing you know they’ll limit something else.”

Beata Kubiak, 19, sat on her stoop enjoying a cigarette. Her mother doesn’t allow smoking inside their public housing apartment in Garfield, and Kubiak said she wouldn’t even if she could.

“I wouldn’t smoke inside anywhere where I live because it sticks to everything,” she said.

She thought that the proposed smoking ban was a good idea, both for health and cleanliness.

“It’s going to show people that there are regulations to live by,” she said.

Angelica DeJesus, 35, of Passaic agreed with the proposal.

“Even back when I was a smoker I wouldn’t smoke inside the house,” she said, recalling bad memories of a chain-smoking neighbor. “You could smell it even when you went in the hallway,” she said.

The public will have 60 days to express their thoughts on the plan via mail or email. The ban would take effect 18 months after the proposed rule is finalized.

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