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Evaluation of the Smoke-free Multiple Unit Dwellings Initiative

Submitted to:

Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research

Prepared by:

Social Research and Demonstration Corporation

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Executive Summary

The Smoke-free Multiple Unit Dwellings Initiative (MUD) was one of four initiatives of the British Columbia Health Living Alliance's (BCHLA) Tobacco Reduction Strategy. While much progress has been made in addressing tobacco use through federal and provincial policy changes (such as restrictions on the sale and marketing of tobacco products, and restriction of smoking in public spaces), little has been done to address exposure to secondhand smoke in the home. The MUD Initiative is notable in that it addresses this gap through informing and educating housing providers across BC about the legality, benefits and need for smoke-free housing. Many have advocated for smoke-free housing, and resources are available for providers online, but none in Canada have provided direct support in implementing a policy change for housing providers.

Key Findings

- The MUD Initiative was able to build on a previous network of individuals and associations that addressed tobacco use and smoke-free housing. It used this network to educate and inform housing providers and promote the initiative and pilot project.
- Two legal opinions were commissioned for the initiative: they supported and gave housing providers the “push” to implement the policy change legally. This helped providers overcome their reluctance and hesitations to create smoke-free housing options.
- The adoption and implementation of a smoke-free housing policy varies depending on the housing type. For example, strata lots and private housing providers are able to make changes more quickly and easily compared to low-income and non-profit housing where more considerations and notice to tenants must be given.
- The initiative provided support to four housing providers during the pilot project to help with implementing policy change. The project manager attempted to recruit other housing providers but this did not eventuate during the initiative.
- Once a housing provider implemented a smoke-free policy, the project manager took a “wait and see” attitude before providing additional support; however, few additional requests were made. Many providers required only the relevant policy opinion to get them moving in making changes. Even if more intense support was provided by the project manager, it may not have been needed.
- Giving tenants advance notice about an upcoming smoke-free policy and educating them on how it will impact them can reduce misunderstanding and promote dialogue. It also provides an opportunity for tenants to ask questions and express concerns.
- While smoke-free housing policies were implemented as a result of the initiative, there were limited results in the short term regarding less exposure to secondhand smoke in the home. This was due to the fact that several housing sites were legally required to offer grandfathering to current tenants that smoked. In focus groups, participants expressed some disappointment and frustration about the length of time it would take before their building was truly smoke-free.
- Creating smoke-free housing is a long-term process. For example, in a housing site that implemented a policy several years ago, there still remain a handful of smokers. Housing providers and tenants should be aware that change will not occur overnight and could take several years to become noticeable.

- When incentives, such as mediating moving costs, were offered to tenants to move from one building/unit or another to speed up the process, none took up the offer. In a tight housing market for tenants, incentives to move may not help. However there may be more interest in incentives such as Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) for current tenants who smoke. The offer of NRT to current tenants affected by the policy change was briefly explored by the project manager.
- Different sub-groups of tenants, such as those with a low income or those receiving housing subsidies, may respond differently to smoke-free housing policy changes, and there is a risk of marginalizing these or other groups who are more limited in their housing options.
- Keeping in line with the target age group in the BCHLA Tobacco Age Group, the MUD Initiative was to work with housing providers who had a majority of tenants between the ages of 19 and 29 years. With this type of initiative it was not possible to target by a specific age group.
- The MUD Initiative showed that a policy change to protect people from second-hand smoke can be implemented, but real change takes time and generally occurs with a changeover in tenants.