

Community Change Chronicles

Women’s Shelter Bans Smoking Inside Facility

Process of Creating Change

In the fall of 2000 the Caldwell County Women’s Shelter started providing women and their children a temporary residence free from not only violence, but also the dangers of secondhand smoke.

The shelter, in existence since 1978, had previously allowed smoking in a limited area inside. Unfortunately this limited area was close to the kitchen facilities, as well as the area where children spent much of their time. The decision was made toward the end of 2000 to allow smoking only outdoors.

Implementing the change was relatively easy. None of the staff smoked, and although smoking was common for residents, the typical stay is just for a few days, resulting in only a minor inconvenience. Leadership of the shelter waited to put the new policy into effect until there were no residents, thereby eliminating the need to force a change on existing residents.

Importance of Change

Smoke-free women’s shelters are important because each is both a work site and a residence. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data for North Carolina in 2002 show that 70.4% of work sites prohibit smoking in both public and work areas. (North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics, 2002) This is critical because we know there is an estimated 20% increased risk of lung cancer in nonsmokers due to ETS. (National Cancer Institute, 2000)

Children are most affected by secondhand smoke. Because their bodies are still developing, exposure to the poisons in secondhand smoke can hinder the growth of their lungs. Additionally, the harmful effects can last a lifetime. Home ventilation systems cannot filter and circulate air well enough to eliminate secondhand smoke. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003) Secondhand smoke is responsible for 150,000 to 300,000 serious respiratory ailments each year in children and infants, including bronchitis, ear infections and

pneumonia. (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1993)

Many leaders of women’s shelters might resist tackling a sensitive subject like tobacco use by residents. Residents are attempting to regain control of their lives and may seek the comfort of tobacco use to help handle the stress. Caldwell County Women’s Shelter realized that staff deserved a healthy work environment and all residents (especially children) deserved a healthy environment in which to heal. The leaders of this shelter recognized the issue as an important one that shouldn’t be avoided.

Lessons Learned

- This change was successful in part because it was implemented during a time when no residents were present. The fact that residential stays are short-term seemed to make any inconvenience to residents minor.
- Emphasize the effect secondhand smoke has on children’s health. Remind decision-makers that providing a safe, but unhealthy place for women and children to stay is not improving lives sufficiently.
- Caldwell County Health Department offers various types of smoking cessation support; this strengthened the likelihood of success. When implementing a smoke-free policy make sure to highlight existing tobacco treatment and support programs.
- Look toward your community tobacco control volunteers. Chances are you might find someone who is also involved in a local women’s shelter. Try implementing change through this inside contact.

Type of Change	Environmental Policy
Risk Factor Addressed	Environmental Tobacco Smoke
Location of Change	Caldwell County Women’s Shelter
Reach/Impact of Change	Typical daily resident capacity: 30 women & children

