

Low-income rentals in Boulder may become smoke-free

Boulder Housing Partners follows county's lead

By Laura Snider Camera Staff Writer

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Just a few months after Boulder County instituted a smoking ban at its low-income rental properties, the city's housing authority is talking about following suit.

Staffers at Boulder Housing Partners are now developing a plan for how they might transition the 1,000 rental units they own and operate to no-smoking accommodations. They plan to take the proposal to the nonprofit's board for feedback in February or March.

"We're trying to be super sensitive to our residents and how this might impact people," said Tim Beal, director of housing services for Boulder Housing Partners. "We deal with folks who have sensitivities on both sides of the issue."

At the urging of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, housing authorities across the country are beginning to go smoke-free, Beal said.

Last spring, the Boulder County Housing Authority announced it would implement a smoking ban in its nearly 500 rental units, which went into effect Sept. 1.

The county offered all tenants the chance to take a six-month extension if they needed more time to try to quit smoking. Only 10 people took it, according to Sally Vigil, property management supervisor for the county's housing authority.

Another five moved out because of the smoke-free rule, and the county decided not to force existing residents at housing that's specifically reserved for seniors and the disabled to participate. Together, that means 80 percent of the county's housing is now smoke-free.

"For the elderly, there are people who have been smoking all their lives and they're in their 80s," said Ana Mostaccero, communications specialist for Boulder County Housing and Human Services. "We're not going to ask them to leave."

But as those apartments are vacated, the new tenants -- elderly or not -- will have to agree not to smoke before they move in.

Local activist Seth Brigham, who used to live in rental housing owned by Boulder Housing Partners, said the city's plan to follow the county's no-smoking lead concerns him. The policy could discriminate against those with mental illnesses, he said, since it's more difficult for them to overcome addictions.

"I'm an anti-smoker, but I know the reality of it," he said. "There are residents with mental health issues and physical health issues who aren't going to be able to quit and who will end up out in the cold."

Similar concerns were raised when the county began talks of the plan, but Mostaccero said the implementation has gone smoothly.

"There have been very few problems enforcing the rule," she said. "Generally, the tenants self-police."

Camera Staff Writer Laura Snider at 303-473-1327 or sniderl@dailycamera.com.