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El Paso public housing communities will be smoke-free

By Diana Washington Valdez / El Paso Times

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The Housing Authority of the City of El Paso will seek to create safer and healthier environments by making all of its public housing smoke-free, according to a new policy that the authority's commissioners adopted.

As housing units are converted to RAD, which stands for Rental Assistance Demonstration, during a \$600 million renovation project that began this year, the smoking ban will be incorporated as a provision in the leases that tenants must sign to live in the housing units.

"Right now, people can smoke. The new policy will be implemented over the course of the next few years as we undergo the RAD conversion," said Gerald Cichon, CEO of the Housing Authority of the City of El Paso. "With the RAD conversion, everyone will have to sign a new lease anyway, and the smoking policy will become a provision in the leases."

Under RAD, the housing authority is converting its Section 9 apartment buildings subsidized by the government to a Section 8 program. This means that the government will pay private landlords a percentage of the rent for low-income families, the elderly and the disabled.

As part of the RAD conversion, the housing authority is renovating housing complexes across the city and is making other changes, such as the smoke-free policy.

The new ban covers tobacco and marijuana smoke and any other smoking products, whether legal or illegal.

HACEP spokesman Oscar Arriaga said the smoking restriction applies indoors and outside in the common areas. The housing authority serves about 40,000 low-income residents throughout the city.

Lupita Licerio, who lives in the Martin Luther King Jr. community in the Lower Valley, said fellow residents she has talked to welcome the new policy.

"They're saying it's about time and it's for the best," Licerio said.

"I myself quit smoking seven years ago after watching all those ads about how it affects your health and others. Many smokers don't realize that their habit affects others. The smoke gets into the ventilation system and carries over to neighbors."

Last week, Mayor Oscar Leeser appointed Licerio to the HACEP Board of Commissioners as the resident commissioner. The commission sets policies for the housing authority.

Housing commissioners passed the resolution approving the new smoke-free policy in December.

The 2012 Paisano Green Community is already smoke-free, Cichon said.

Last year, students at the University of Texas at El Paso School of Nursing conducted a survey of 1,422 public housing units to get an idea of how ready the communities might be to accept smoking restrictions.

More than 80 percent of those who were surveyed indicated that they preferred to live in smoke-free environment. The survey was made possible by a grant of the Paso del Norte Health Foundation, which promotes healthy lifestyles.

"An overwhelming percentage of the residents said they wanted to live in a smoke-free community, including smokers," Cichon said.

The UTEP nursing students also provided stop-smoking classes to help the residents who wanted to quit smoking.

Diana Washington Valdez may be reached at 546-6140.

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