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In a week, more than 36,000 Philadelphia public housing residents will be asked to take their cigarettes outside, an unprecedented bid to try to improve the health of some of the city's neediest tenants.

Officials wondering about the new smoking ban's potential for success can look to the west.

Two years ago, Chester County's housing authority started a strict policy to curb smoking among tenants: No tobacco use anywhere on its properties. It was the first housing agency in Southeastern Pennsylvania to go smoke-free.

Some residents in its more than 200 units in West Chester, Phoenixville, and Oxford resisted at first, county officials said. But only one tenant has faced eviction for violating the ban.

Dale Gravett, the authority's executive director, was surprised by the level of compliance.

"The transition was a lot smoother than I expected it to be," he said. "I thought there would be more adamant opposition among the small minority that were smokers."

More than 570 public housing authorities nationwide are smoke-free. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development encourages housing authorities to ban smoking, to promote healthy living environments for families.

The federal agency is also considering a nationwide smoking ban in public housing.

The Philadelphia ban excludes tens of thousands of tenants in federal Section 8 housing, which typically is reserved for very low-income tenants.

Still, Thurman Brendlinger, program director at the Clean Air Council, called it "a great step forward toward protecting public health."

Under the policy, Philadelphia tenants will be allowed to smoke in designated areas. And they will not face a quick eviction for violating the ban.

In Philadelphia, residents with leases at existing units who violate the smoking ban will first receive notices of violation that emphasize resources to help them quit smoking.

Residents in new or "substantially rehabilitated" units who sign leases on or after Aug. 5 may face eviction only after four violations.

For the next nine months, the housing authority will track the number of violations it issues and how many residents sign up for and complete smoking-cessation classes to gauge the effectiveness of its enforcement of the policy.

In Chester County, officials say the threat of eviction is a vital tool.

"Most tenants, when they realize we take it seriously, they're happy to comply, because they don't want to lose their homes," said John Kostyal, director of public housing at the Housing Authority of Chester County.

One tenant in the authority's Phoenixville building for disabled and elderly residents continued to smoke in multiple locations in the building and on the property outside.

Officials said the man, whom they did not name, ignored several warnings and notices, and has been served with an eviction notice. He is appealing.

Dorothy Kelly, 61, who lives in the Church Street Towers in West Chester, said she smokes occasionally and called the ban a little annoying.

But Kelly, who said she started smoking at 17, said she follows the rules - smoking only off authority property - so she can stay in her home.

"I can appreciate some of the benefits from it," she said.

Carol Thomas, a former smoker who quit before the ban, said spending time in the fresh air on the Church Street Towers porch is more enjoyable these days.

"Before, you couldn't even come out here and sit," Thomas, 64, said.

Other counties may not be far behind.

The Montgomery County Housing Authority might consider such a ban in its residences, said Joel Johnson, executive director.

"We're keeping up with some of the other housing authorities that have done it to gauge their experience," he said.

http://www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/20150729_As_PHA_smoking_ban_looms_Chesco_breathes_easy.html#41DWMchFAkXRvHfz.99