

Support grows for smoke-free units - Globe & Mail

Poll shows 57 per cent of residents would support ban in apartment buildings

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First came smoke-free restaurants and bars. Then came workplace bans. Now, support for kicking smokers out of apartment buildings is hitting home, quite literally.

An Ontario anti-smoking group says polling it commissioned has found majority support for banning smoking within individual residences in apartment buildings or any other multiunit household in the province.

The Ontario Tobacco-Free Network, which had the poll conducted and will release it today, says 57 per cent of those living in multiunit dwellings would support such a ban.

Smoking is currently prohibited in elevators, hallways and other common areas in Ontario, but not in apartment residences. The poll detected widespread annoyance over second-hand smoke seeping into the residences of non-smokers, with half of those surveyed saying they've had tobacco smoke odour enter their units from elsewhere in their buildings, and 70 per cent of those saying they're bothered by it.

The finding is believed to be the first public opinion survey in Canada showing attitudes are hardening against smokers in home settings. Until now, smokers have thought of their homes as sanctuaries where they could light up in peace, but the poll suggests smoking is starting to be viewed in the same light as other off-putting behaviour in communal settings, such as noise, poor hygiene and late-night parties.

The pollster who conducted the survey predicted the next big move against smoking will be in multiunit dwellings, with increasing pressure for buildings to be designated as smoke free.

"What the research clearly shows is that you've got six out of 10 people out there that, if you hang out a shingle that says smoke-free apartment or condominium complex, you're going to have people decide to move into that," said John Wright, a senior vice-president of Ipsos Reid, which conducted the survey.

The poll surveyed 1,800 people across the province who live in multiunit residences, and is considered to be accurate within 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. It was conducted in November and March of 2006, with the second round of questioning done to confirm the findings.

If the finding that nearly half of those living in multiunit dwellings have had tobacco smoke enter their units was applied across Ontario, it suggests about two million of the four million total residents are being exposed to unwanted second-hand smoke, a known carcinogen, from neighbours.

The poll also found that 64 per cent of those living in multiunit dwellings would choose, when looking for a place to live, a smoke-free building over one where smoking was permitted.

The Ontario Tobacco-Free Network is a coalition of three prominent public health organizations: the Canadian Cancer Society, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario, and the Lung Association.

Network spokeswoman Irene Gallagher said the health organizations found they were starting to deal with a large number of unsolicited complaints from members of the public about second-hand smoke drifting among residences in multiunit dwellings. The health groups wanted to check how widespread these concerns were.

According to Ms. Gallagher, the large number of respondents preferring not to come into contact with smokers in home settings suggests an unfilled need in the housing market. "There is a big demand in the market for smoke-free buildings," she said.

Currently, there is nothing to stop landlords from offering smoke-free buildings or having non-smoking clauses in leases, and some building owners in both Canada and the U.S. have begun seeking this status for their residences, as have some new condominium developments.

The poll found that about one-third of respondents were bothered by smoke from their neighbours and 6 per cent found the problem so annoying they either moved or considered moving to get away from smokers.

A number of complaints have also been made to Ontario's Landlord and Tenant Board, where some residents have sought to have landlords evict smokers using legal provisions normally applied against those who create nuisances.

The finding of widespread health concern over smoking in multiunit homes doesn't come as a surprise to Adrienne Schutt, a Peterborough resident who lives in a small apartment building and has recently been bothered by smoke from neighbours.

If there were a ban in Ontario on smoking in apartments, "I would be overjoyed, absolutely overjoyed. It's incredibly unpleasant" to be exposed to second-hand smoke, she said.

She lives in an apartment where the landlord failed to enforce an existing lease provision banning smoking, something that irked her after two heavy smokers moved next door and began smoking on a shared balcony, causing cigarette smoke to drift into her unit.

"You shouldn't be subjected to something hazardous in your own home," she said. "It's not 1930 any more. We know this [tobacco] is going to kill us."