

# Making sure all New Mexico residents have access to smokefree housing

## A NEW FOCUS

The American Lung Association in New Mexico has been working on smokefree multi-unit housing since 2009 educating tenants and working with property managers to ensure residents could live in homes that were safe from the dangers of secondhand smoke traveling between units.

However, much of that early work involved market rate apartments. JoAnna Strother, Director of Programs for the American Lung Association in New Mexico, explains why they decided to change their focus.

“We wanted to work where the disparities were greatest, that meant doing smokefree work with public and affordable housing. The residents of these units have higher smoking rates and don’t always have as much access to cessation resources.” - JoAnna Strother

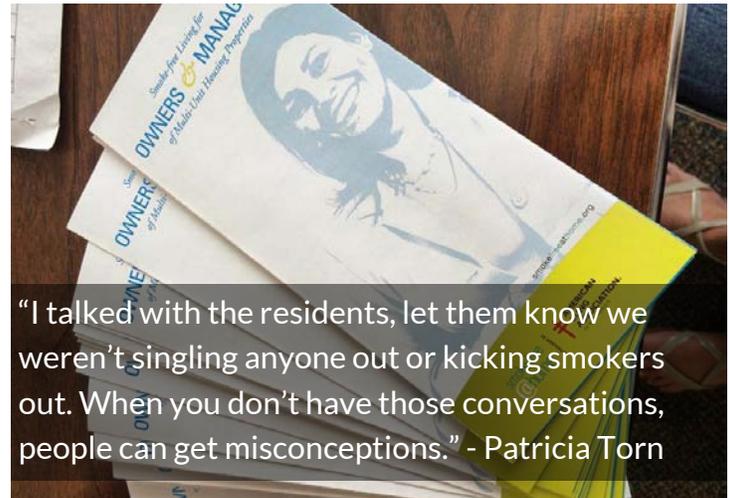
Patricia Torn, also of the American Lung Association in New Mexico, describes how economics make it difficult for affordable housing residents to move out of a smoky apartment, even when the smoke is having a detrimental impact on their health.

“Many of the residents, particularly senior citizens, have serious lung or heart conditions and can’t be around smoke. At the same time, this is the only housing they can afford. They don’t have the ability to pack up and move.” - Patricia Torn

## ADMINISTRATIVE CREATIVITY

To kick start the public and affordable housing work, The American Lung Association awarded three mini-grants using funding they had received from the American Lung Association National Office.

The mini-grants came with technical assistance from the American Lung Association in New Mexico, helping answer questions from both property managers and tenants about the property going smokefree.



The mini-grants also covered costs involved with implementing a smokefree policy - staff time, signage, and the printing of new leases. Additionally, the American Lung Association in New Mexico offered workshops to help prepare interested tenants to make a quit attempt.

## BERNALILLO COUNTY

One mini-grant went to the Bernalillo County Housing Department. Bernalillo County is the most populous county in New Mexico, containing much of the Albuquerque metro area. The Bernalillo County Housing Department operates 75 units in two locations. 54 units for the elderly and 21 for people with disabilities.

“We saw smokefree housing as a proactive approach to better community health and maintenance cost-savings at our public housing communities,” - Betty Valdez, Housing Director, Bernalillo County



The turnover costs for an apartment that has been smoked in can be several times higher than the turnover costs of a non-smoking apartment. As the funding for Bernalillo County Public Housing comes from public sources, Valdez says a smokefree policy is a way to be a good steward of taxpayer dollars.

When residents were asked about a smokefree policy, many were in favor, citing concerns for safety. Not just the dangers of secondhand smoke but also the increased risk for apartment fires related to smoking materials.

**“I don’t want to live next to people who are smoking. It’s very dangerous.” - Josephine Parrez, Resident, Bernalillo County Public Housing**

Bernalillo County’s Public Housing board passed a smokefree policy. Now, when residents sign a lease, they agree not to smoke in their apartments and common areas, only in designated outdoor smoking areas on the property.



For their smokefree efforts, Bernalillo County was awarded a Lung Champion Award from the American Lung Association in New Mexico.

## **SANTO DOMINGO PUEBLO & SAN FELIPE PUEBLO**

Two mini-grants went to American Indian tribal housing agencies, the Santo Domingo Pueblo and the San Felipe Pueblo.

Patricia Torn says she found a true smokefree housing champion in Greta Armijo, the Executive Director of the Santo Domingo Tribal Housing Authority. Armijo immediately saw the health and financial benefits for the Pueblo going smokefree.

Armijo encouraged her colleagues at San Felipe Pueblo to apply, knowing the high rates of asthma at San Felipe Pueblo and that secondhand smoke is a trigger for asthma attacks.



**“This is for our children. Smoking rates for tribal youth are rising. We need to change that.” - Greta Armijo at the Smokefree Tribal Housing Summit.**

Armijo and Torn did tenant education similar to what was done in Bernalillo County but they also included some education specific to the Pueblo audience. They educated tribal members on the difference between traditional tobacco, a plant used in many religious ceremonies, and commercial tobacco, an entirely different plant bred by industrial farming to be as addictive as possible.

Very quickly, Santo Domingo leaders passed a smokefree housing policy for new leases. However, Armijo wanted to do more. Armijo and others at the Santo Domingo Pueblo organized a statewide event called the Smokefree Tribal Housing Summit. Representatives from half a dozen pueblos and several Navajo Nation representatives were in attendance.

San Felipe Pueblo continues to work on its smokefree policy. The Pueblo recently completed a large housing expansion, including 15 units in a new multi-unit building for tribal elders. A smokefree policy is a way to protect the new building and its residents.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

While the American Lung Association National Office grant is over, a state grant has given the American Lung Association of New Mexico financial support to continue the work. Strother believes the successes of Bernalillo County will motivate the City of Albuquerque and other municipalities to make their public housing units go smokefree.

Torn says the Smokefree Tribal Housing Summit gave them extra momentum, with several representatives eager to get to work. Torn believes more tribal housing will go smokefree within the next year.

**“We’ve been working on smokefree housing since 2009 but something feels different. Property managers and tenants get it now. This is the new wave in housing, smokefree housing is the new norm.” - JoAnna Strother**