



## Excelsior Fire District Fire Marshal Shares Smoke-free Policy Advocacy Efforts

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Fires caused by cigarettes are deadly. According to the 2016 Fire in Minnesota Report, while careless smoking accounts for only 3% of structure fires, it caused 25% of known fire fatalities. Kellie Murphy-Ringate, Excelsior Fire District Fire Marshal, has been initiating conversations with property managers since 2009 about converting their apartment buildings to smoke-free. She approached the subject by informing them of the hazards of cigarette smoking *inside and outside* apartment buildings.

The Excelsior Fire District is made up of the cities of Deephaven, Excelsior, Greenwood, Shorewood and Tonka Bay. During the annual inspections in these cities for multiple family dwelling, Murphy-Ringate has used an educational brochure developed by Hennepin County Public Health and the Live Smoke Free program about smoke-free multi-unit housing policies. Murphy-Ringate shares, "To start, I look for careless smoking habits, like discarded cigarette butts, cigarette burns on decks and patio furniture, and overfilled ashtrays, when I do a 360 walk around of the property. Then, I discuss my findings and go over how to resolve the issues with the owner/operators of the building. I tell them that if there are bad habits and careless smoking on the outside, there are usually the same on the inside." Murphy-Ringate encourages management to either adopt a smoke-free policy and/or offers support on how they can better enforce an existing policy.

As a result of direct outreach many properties adopted indoor smoke-free policies. However, the fire district saw an increase in fires caused by cigarette smoking *outside*. The common cause was a lack of awareness of how a discarded cigarette could roll, or flicking lit cigarettes near an exterior wall as people walked into a building could start a fire on the outside. As a result, all apartments that allowed smoking were required to have a commercial non-combustible, heavy duty, weighed down ashtray at each door. These requirements also included an educational piece that helped reduce exterior building and grass fires within the district.

In addition to the health and safety benefits for residents of smoke-free housing, property managers benefit as well. Excelsior Fire District works with owners and operators to educate them on the effects the secondhand smoke has on the building itself. Once the tenant leaves it is more costly to clean the apartment and takes longer to get the apartment ready for another tenant. Murphy-Ringate had a property manager comment to her, "I am so sick and tired of renovating a smoking apartment. It's expensive and dirty. It's more cost effective to flip a non-smoking unit and it has a quicker rate of occupancy. The money saved can go towards upgrades."

Murphy-Ringate believes that their approach of initiating the conversation and heightening awareness has contributed to several conversions of local apartment buildings adopting smoke-free policies. The advocacy and commitment of the Excelsior Fire District to reduce fires due to cigarette smoking can be easily replicated by other fire districts. For more information on how to assist property managers go smoke-free, please contact Live Smoke Free staff at 651-646-3005 or visit their website at [www.mnsmokefreehousing.org](http://www.mnsmokefreehousing.org) for resources specifically packaged for Fire Department staff.