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SECTION D
TUESDAY 11/15/11



Breathing easy

Coalition urges condos and apartment buildings to go smoke-free

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By Sarah Zoellick
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ELAINÉ WATAI remembers sitting in the laundry room of her public housing complex a few years ago when she and some friends saw babies in diapers walking around, unattended, picking discarded cigarette filters off the ground and chewing on them.

"Oh, my God, how gross," I thought," Watai said. "How awful." Watai has lived in Jack Hall Memorial Housing in Kailua, Kona, since 1986 when her husband took a post-retirement job as the property's resident manager. She took over his job when he died two years ago and became acutely aware of how prevalent smoking is at the housing complex.

Yet there are no containers for smokers to dispose of their butts, nor are there designated areas for smoking. Occasionally she leads group cleanups with youths, but feels stronger action is needed. Watai wants "no smoking" signs posted. "We're hoping to find out from here where our next step can be," she said. "That's all we can do for now."

Five years ago Hawaii became the 14th state in the nation to ban smoking in and around businesses and public places, including within 20 feet of entrances and exits, open windows and air-intake vents.

The law does not cover smoking in the home, and public housing is exempt from rules restricting smoking on government-owned property. But as the health dangers of secondhand smoke have become well documented and widely publicized, more people living in close quarters to smoking neighbors across the nation are complaining and in some cases filing lawsuits against offending smokers and property owners.

THE COALITION for a Tobacco-Free Hawai'i is boosting its efforts to increase the number of smoke-free housing options because so many people here live in condominiums and apartments. According to 2010 Census data, multi-unit housing comprises more than 40 percent of all housing units in Hawaii (46 percent on Oahu).

Smokers are in the minority in the isles; a 2010 Hawaii Department of Health survey indicated that 14.5 percent of residents smoke. An affi-

"When you have a building that allows smoke, you're dissuading people who don't like smoke from entering your building," said Serena Chen, regional policy advocacy director for the association.

Chen was invited by the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Hawai'i to speak last month to association board members, property owners and others interested in changing their condominiums or apartments to smoke-free buildings.

At this point the coalition is not pushing legislation for a statewide ban on smoking in multi-unit dwellings, but instead is working to make it happen one building at a time, said Executive Director Deborah Zysman.

"(We're) trying to work instead on getting a few places to go smoke-free and transition it in that way," she said. "We're not against smokers; we're just trying to figure out how to not have people exposed to the smoke."

Zysman said the coalition knows of at least 10 condominiums or apartment buildings in the state that prohibit smoking on lanais, within units or both.

"It's probably not an exhaustive list," she said, "but there is demand" for smoke-free housing.

MARILYN GAGEN'S 10-unit building at 2131 Fern St. near the McCully Shopping Center was just added to the list.

Residents have been prohibited from smoking in their units for as long as Gagen can remember, but she's recently taken it a step further by banning smoking on lanais and in common areas.

"I talked to some of the tenants in the building who were smokers, and they were fine with it," she said, "especially the ones with small children."

Gagen, who is also a coalition board member, offered a six-month grace period to get smokers used to the idea or to find other accommodations, she said.

Hawaii and federal laws do not prevent landlords from banning smoking inside individual units, nor do they require "grandfathering" in current tenants who smoke.

"There's just no special protection for the act of smoking," Chen said.

In 2006 the U.S. Surgeon General determined there is no way to fully ventilate secondhand smoke from

Great American Smokeout events planned statewide

The American Cancer Society's 30th annual Great American Smokeout is Thursday. Here's a list of events taking place throughout Hawaii and the number for the Hawaii Tobacco Quitline:

OAHU

>> Health fair, 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., University of Hawaii-Manoa's Campus Center Mall, 2465 Campus Road, offering interactive games, displays, giveaways and prizes. The fair's theme is "Clean Air, Clean 'Aina." The Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Hawai'i, UH School of Dental Hygiene, Waikiki Health Center, Hawaii Bone Marrow Donor Registry and Blood Bank of Hawaii will be on hand, with music provided by KTUH. Contact Lisa Kehl or Kristen Scholly, 956-8060.

MAUI

>> The Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Maui's Great American Smokeout event, 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Maui Mall in Kahului, with food, entertainment and family fun. Winners of the "Smoke-Free Cars - Healthy Kids & Ohana" art contest will be recognized. Contact Sonya Niess, 575-7602 or sonya@tobaccofreehawaii.org.

HAWAII ISLAND

>> West Hawaii Tobacco-Free Coalition exhibit table at free Luncheon and Community Fair, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Old Kona Airport, Makaeo Pavilion. The fair is sponsored by HOPE Services Hawaii Inc., Family Support Hawaii and Community Alliance Partners-Hawaii County. Contact Josephine Ibarra, 933-6041 or jibarra@hopeserviceshawaii.org.

>> Turkey Trot/Great American Smokeout, 11:30 a.m. to noon, Waialae Intermediate School, hosted by American Cancer Society-East Hawaii Branch. Students can participate in a fun run, games and Tobacco-Free Me Pledge. Contact Vanessa Carlson, 981-7231.

KAUAI

>> Great American Smokeout "Holo Holo," 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., various Garden Isle beach parks including Pine Tree Inn, Hanamaulu and Kapaa, distribution of quilt kits and on-the-spot cessation advice, sponsored by American Cancer Society, Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Hawai'i, Kauai Veterans Clinic, Ho'ola Lahui. Contact Susan Oshiro-Taogoshi, 246-0695.

RESOURCES:

Hawaii Tobacco Quitline: 800-QUIT-NOW (free)
www.clearthesmoke.org
Facebook: www.facebook.com/clearthesmoke
Twitter: @clearthesmoke



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Serena Chen
Regional policy advocacy director, American Lung Association in California, on housing complexes that accommodate smokers



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Elaine Watai
Resident at Jack Hall Memorial Housing, on babies chewing on discarded cigarette butts at her Kona housing complex