

MILWAUKEE NEWS

Quitters always win with Meta House's new smoke-free policy

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If you want to see pushback, tell people who are trying to beat drug habits that they can't smoke cigarettes either. It's working at Meta House, though there have been ups and downs.

The smoke-free campus policy, which kicked off in July, is a huge shift in the culture at the substance abuse treatment center for women, located in Milwaukee's Riverwest neighborhood.

Amy Weisbrot, a registered nurse at Meta House and a former smoker herself, pushed for the change.

"I started here in 2007, and I have this beautiful office that faces the courtyard, and at any given time there would be 30 women in the courtyard smoking," she said. "It was appalling."

Employees were down there smoking. Residents, including many pregnant women, were puffing away, too. And no one did anything about it. Over and over, day after day, the stench of cigarettes followed them back inside where the residents' children also live.

There's a mantra among people working to overcome alcohol and other drug addictions. Give me something to hold onto. Don't take my cigarettes. I deserve this much. Weisbrot answers this by quoting a figure that quitting smoking makes people 33% more likely to maintain sobriety.

She knows the smoking ban is radical. She can't think of any other inpatient drug treatment center in Milwaukee that has done it. Meta House, which marks its 50th anniversary this year, has received support and financial

grants from the Wisconsin Nicotine and Tobacco Integration Project through the University of Wisconsin Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention.

Many workers at Meta House have quit smoking. They were given plenty of notice, guidance and opportunities for input before the campus went smoke-free. The grants have helped pay for nicotine patches and gum to ease the cravings, and a kickoff party to celebrate the change.

Employees are expected to refrain from smoking throughout their shifts. Some cheat occasionally.

"They go out to their cars at lunchtime and they make excuses that they're going out to get something to eat and they come back smelling of perfume. But at least they're not running out every 15 minutes smoking," Weisbrot said.

When smokers went across Weil St. to light up, technically placing them off campus, neighbors complained and the policy was expanded to include anywhere in sight of the property.

Christine Ullstrup has worked at Meta House for 19 years, now serving as director of programs. She is a graduate herself of the substance abuse program. She smoked throughout most of those years, finally quitting in 2007 after a close friend died of lung cancer.

"I say to the clients often that I wish when I was in treatment that somebody had made me quit," she said.

The last straw for Weisbrot was when babies born to three residents at Meta House, all heavy smokers, were diagnosed with asthma by the time they were 3 months old.

Babies born since the smoking ban have been healthy and of normal birth weight. The residents now make less frequent trips to the doctor for smoking-related ailments. Employee sick days have dropped, Weisbrot said. To reduce temptation, the breaks between classes and group sessions have been shortened from 15 minutes to five.

Residents caught smoking multiple times are asked to leave residential treatment. They may go to outpatient care or to a different provider that

allows smoking. A few have left voluntarily rather than give up cigarettes.

Valerie Pacula, a resident at Meta House, points to herself as a success story. She was in jail late last year because of her drug abuse, and she decided to stay there six extra weeks to get a spot at Meta House rather than accept earlier release to a treatment center that allowed smoking.

"It's the best thing I could have done. I don't see smoking around me," said Pacula, 28, who has been free of cigarettes for 11 weeks, the longest stretch since she started smoking at age 14.

"This is my number one motivation right here," she said, pointing to Taylor, her curly haired 21-month-old daughter.

"I've got a good head start."

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