
How to Talk About Wood Smoke Pollution

A guide to negotiating with
neighbors and creating
compromise in your
neighborhood

I See Smoke PA, a Clean Air Council Program

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Starting the Conversation

Wood smoke pollution is a problem facing residential communities across the country. But sometimes our concerns about a possible confrontation prevent us from taking that first step to initiate a conversation with a neighbor whose smoke is affecting us. Clean Air Council's *I See Smoke* program was asked by residents to create a guide to help those impacted by wood smoke through the process of talking to our neighbors and illustrate how to take next steps if the problem continues.

Share your concerns

Step one: Make a connection

Open the conversation by making a connection to your neighbor causing the wood burning problem. If you don't know the person, introduce yourself. If you are acquaintances, remind them of your connection (our kids go to school together; we met at the block party last year etc.). Opening up with a compliment about their garden or a funny story about your kids can help start things off on a friendly note. Then ask them when they might have some time to talk about something important.

Step two: Share your story

Enlist their support by sharing why this is important to you. Good communication builds trust and allows you to discuss your problem in a peaceful and respectful way. It might not have even crossed your neighbor's mind that their actions are negatively impacting others in the community. By calmly communicating that you're concerned about how the smoke pollution is impacting your health and the health of others, you may be able to convince your neighbor to change their burning habits.

Step three: Have the facts

You have expressed how you feel and you are still not being heard. The next step is to give your neighbor some resources about the health impacts of wood smoke. Give your neighbor *Clean Air Council's* handout on the health effects of wood smoke, and let them know that you are concerned. This fact sheet describes the impacts of being exposed to wood smoke pollution such as cardiac and respiratory illness and the fact that such smoke is most dangerous to children, the elderly, and those already suffering from chronic conditions such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema and allergies.

This isn't just about your health; it's also about the health of your neighbor and community. Wood smoke pollution impacts both you and the wood burning family. Enlisting the head and heart might help you get through to a reluctant neighbor.



Step four: Understand where your neighbor is coming from and talk it out

Just as you want your neighbor to understand your perspective on wood smoke; it is important to take the time to listen to their concerns. Many people burn wood because they come from families of wood burners and it may bring back pleasant memories. If you have access to a robust wood supply, burning wood is often seen as a significantly cheaper heating option. We know that low costs or convenience should not trump health and safety, but it is important to know that wood burning could be seen by the neighbor as a cost-effective option. Understanding where someone is coming from and being empathic to their opinion is one of the most effective ways of collaborating on a solution.



Talking it Through: Tips on How to Approach the Situation

- Always be respectful, even if your neighbor is not. This is key to any disagreement.
- If you find yourself getting angry, take a breath to calm down. It is important to take time to cool off and relieve stress before you approach your neighbor.
- By remaining calm you can accurately read and interpret verbal and nonverbal communication. Nonverbal clues can say a lot—make sure your facial expressions, tone of voice, posture and gestures all convey that you are serious and respectful.
- Focus on areas of common interests. A good place to start is with health. Everyone cares that their children and family are healthy.
- Don't focus on issues other than wood burning. If there are other ongoing disagreements, discuss them at a separate time.
- Make sure you pick the right time to open up a conversation. Even though they may be burning late at night or when guests are over, these probably are not the best times to start a serious conversation.
- Don't jump to conclusions or make assumptions about the other person. Listen to their point of view without interrupting or interjecting your opinion—it is important to understand their side of the issue.
- Attack the problem, not the person. Personal attacks about your neighbor's personality or unrelated issues will only take away from your legitimate argument. Be assertive but not aggressive. Express your concerns without resorting to personal attacks or yelling.
- Be open to a compromise. A compromise agreement might help give you relief, even if it isn't exactly what you wanted. Don't view this disagreement as a competition with only one loser and one winner.
- Be a good neighbor, yourself. Don't give your neighbor ammunition to use against you by also contributing to nuisances.



Taking Action

It's quite possible that you can try to have constructive conversations with your neighbor and they just refuse to listen. But there are still more steps you can take to change their behavior.

1: Start keeping records

If you are still having problems with your neighbor, start documenting the burning. Pictures, videos, and logs of times and durations are helpful to present the seriousness of the issue both to authorities and to your neighbor.

2. Give them a heads up

It is always a good idea to let your neighbor know that you are going to contact authorities and take more serious action. This helps to maintain a cordial discourse as you try to get authorities to intervene.

It might also be really helpful to see if other people in your neighborhood are having similar problems with your wood burning neighbor. If more than one family raises the issue, authorities will be more likely to take the reports seriously and it might become more of a serious concern to the wood burner.

3: Report the burning to your township, local health department and the Department of Environmental Protection

Every town, county, and city has slightly different rules about who oversees wood burning issues. You should look to report the burning complaints to your township and local health department, as well as the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. Municode.com is a good resource to look up the local code addressing wood burning.

One easy way to report burning is through Clean Air Council's *I See Smoke* Map (wikimapping.net/wikimap/smoke.html). Using this app, you can report open outdoor burning and outdoor wood-fired boiler nuisances. The map allows users to pinpoint their location, describe the issue, and submit that information to the appropriate authorities. This simple tool is a great way to easily log burning complaints to the correct agencies.

4: Follow up with your reports

Sometimes it takes two, three, or four complaints for a township to finally take action. Calling the authorities directly puts additional pressure on them to respond. It is important to follow through with your response to indicate how serious this is and how it needs immediate attention.

**If you are having trouble connecting with your local authority, please feel free to reach out to the Clean Air Council (215-576-4004 ext. 128) and we can assist with an extra push for your township to respond to your complaints.



5: Spread the word!

Wood burning is an issue that not many people are familiar with. Connect with *I See Smoke PA* on Facebook and Twitter and share relevant news articles with your friends and followers. Not on social media? Check out our website for similar information: ISeeSmokePA.org.

There are communities of people online struggling with wood smoke pollution. Reaching out to these groups on Facebook and other social media platforms can help connect people in similar situations to share experiences and seek advice.

You can also share your story with I See Smoke. Send your stories to msimon@cleanair.org and we can work with you to create opinion media pieces that elevate the issue and illustrate its severity.

6: Become an advocate

In your community, you can advocate for anti-wood burning legislation in your township. Sample legislation for open burning bans or outdoor wood fired boiler bans can be found on our website: ISeeSmokePa.org. Clean Air Council can also help you connect with local decision-makers to ask them to support anti-wood burning measures.

7. Legal Action

The law allows you to enjoy your home without interference from you neighbors' activities. If your neighbor is unwilling to work with you and wood smoke remains a serious issue, you should consult a lawyer. This should be a last resort as it will exacerbate tensions with your neighbor and you will have to pay for the lawyer. For more information on such lawsuits please connect with *I See Smoke PA* and the *Clean Air Council*.

Connect With Us

We would love to hear from you. If you are having a problem with wood smoke pollution in your neighborhood please reach out to us:

Website: <http://www.ISeeSmokePA.org>

Mapping app: <http://www.wikimapping.net/wikimap/smoke.html>

Facebook: [Facebook.com/ISeeSmokePA](https://www.facebook.com/ISeeSmokePA)

Twitter: [@ISeeSmokePA](https://twitter.com/ISeeSmokePA)

Email: Mollie Simon at msimon@cleanair.org

Phone: 215-567-4004 ext: 128



Sources

Developed By Wholistic Stress Control Institute, Inc., and Distributed By The State Wellness Program, A Pro. Ten Strategies for Conflict Resolution (n.d.): n. pag. Web.

"Put Conflict Resolution Skills to Work." Journal of Oncology Practice 4.1 (2008): 37-40. Web.

"12 Steps to Dealing With Bad Neighbors." Readers Digest 12 Steps to Dealing With Bad Neighbors Comments. N.p., 18 July 2011. Web. 03 Apr. 2015.



I See Smoke PA: Fact Sheet on Wood Burning

- Burning wood results in high levels of soot, particulate matter, and carcinogenic material, and has effects similar to secondhand smoke.
- Toxins emitted in the wood burning process can cause any of the following:
 - Increased respiratory symptoms, such as irritation of the airways, coughing, or difficulty breathing
 - Decreased lung function
 - Aggravated asthma
 - Development of chronic bronchitis
 - Irregular heartbeat
 - Nonfatal heart attacks
 - Premature death in people with heart or lung disease.
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 survey statistics, over one in ten homes burned wood as their primary heating fuel (2.4 million American housing units).
- A recent report by Environment and Human Health Inc. showed that homes nearly three football fields away (850 feet) from an outdoor wood-fired boilers had six times the level of particulates as control homes.
- The smallest outdoor wood-fired boiler has the potential to emit almost one and one-half tons of particulate matter every year.
- Little energy is produced at a high health risk to the surrounding community, especially the young, elderly and those with a predisposition to respiratory and cardiac illness.

Wood Smoke

from Outdoor Wood-fired Boilers (OWBs) causes a host of environmental and public health issues that can impair local air quality and exacerbate health problems. The boilers release large amounts of carbon, nitrogen and sulfur oxides, volatile organic compounds and fine particulate matter. These pollutants can affect your:



Respiratory System



Cardiovascular System



Nervous System



Digestive System



Reproductive System



Immune System

Additional Resources

- I See Smoke PA's Guide to wood burning toxins:
<https://iseesmokepa.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/iseesmoke-owb-infographic-04-02-14.pdf>
<https://iseesmokepa.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/iseesmoke-factsheets-full.pdf>
- EPA Guide to Wood Smoke Health Impacts:
http://www.epa.gov/burnwise/pdfs/woodsmoke_health_effects_jan07.pdf
- Environment and Human Health Inc., The Health Effects of Wood Smoke
http://www.ehhi.org/woodsmoke/health_effects.shtml
- Families for Clean Air, Wood Smoke Myths and Facts:
<http://www.familiesforcleanair.org/myths/>
- Burning Issues: The Fast Fact Sheet from Clean Air Revival
<http://burningissues.org/car-www/education/simple-facts.htm>

