

## Sarah Coefield - Responding to smoke in small communities<sup>1</sup>

When smoke from wildland fires comes to a community, it affects everyone. The smoke may come in very high concentrations, and it may last until the snow falls. When this happens in a small, rural community, it may be especially difficult to help. Here are some things that we learned from our experience in Seeley Lake, Montana, during the summer of 2017.



The worst time to respond to a disaster is while it's happening. Instead of trying to cope in the middle of a crisis, individuals and organizations can prepare:

- Encourage people with respiratory problems to get a HEPA filter for at least one room in their home. Encourage them to have extra filters on hand, since dense smoke clogs the filters quickly.
- Encourage businesses, services and public places (clinics, hospitals, library, senior centers, community halls, schools, gyms...) to have a space with filtered air and make it available to the public.
- Better yet, encourage these organizations to install air cleaners with their heating/cooling systems. Most air-conditioning systems are built to take in outside air (presumed to be clean) and deliver it to the inside. But if the outside air is full of smoke, that will make the indoor air quality just as bad as the outside.
- Look for low-cost solutions. There may be do-it-yourself suggestions online.

When small communities are impacted by smoke, they get less attention than urban areas, and yet they have fewer resources to cope with smoke.

- Since they probably don't have equipment for monitoring air quality, they may not know how bad the air really is. They might be able to borrow an air quality monitor, but it will only work if they have cell coverage, which is not guaranteed in rural areas. It will help to know how to use the visibility index (<http://deg.mt.gov/Air/SF/breakpointsrevised>).
- Small communities may not have people with the expertise to respond quickly and effectively to a smoke crisis. While the community may need information and help from

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<sup>1</sup> This article summarizes a 26-minute video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FmiTLj8Ggo>) that contains excerpts of a presentation by Sarah Coefield, Air Quality Specialist, Missoula County, MT, to participants in the 2019 Wildfire and Smoke Workshop, hosted by the BC Lung Association, Feb 6, 2019, in Vancouver, BC.

regional experts, these outsiders may not know how best to help or how to share information effectively with local residents.

- Money: During the 2017 fire season, no public money was readily available to help people suffering from smoke. The county health department emptied their “emergency preparedness” budget (which was supposed to be used in case of a bad flu season) and then requested money from charities and individual donors.

We provide information, construct buildings, and plan ahead for earthquakes and structural fires. We should do the same for smoke from wildland fires.