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Creating Safe Spaces within the Smoke

Contact: Sarah Coefield 258-3642 or Ellen Leahy 258-3882, Missoula City-County Health Department
Amy Cilimburg, Climate Smart Missoula, 406-465-1141

Missoula, MT. It's back-to-school time, and the wildfire smoke in our air is as thick as ever. Smoke remains especially bad in Seeley Lake and Lolo. This is bad for all of us, but especially for vulnerable groups – including our children.

It's tricky to figure out how to address the health effects of wildfire smoke. We can't import clean air. But thanks to collaboration between several local groups, we are implementing some practical solutions for some of our most vulnerable residents. In particular, many school children in the smokiest areas will be spending their days in classrooms with HEPA air filters to clean the air they breathe. [Climate Smart Missoula](#) launched the efforts that led to the Missoula City-County Health Department and Seeley Lake Elementary School pooling funds to buy air filters for classrooms. And when the wildfire smoke in Lolo became hazardous, the Health Department and United Way of Missoula County worked together to buy enough filters for Lolo's preschool, first through fifth grade, and special education classrooms.

This summer, Climate Smart Missoula also worked with Providence St. Patrick Hospital—an early partner and major funder of all these efforts – to buy HEPA air filters for older adults and families with young children who were at high risk for complications, but who lacked the funds to purchase filters. Community Medical Center and NorthWestern Energy also provided funds, and Missoula Aging Services, Partnership Health Center's Seeley Lake clinic, and the Health Department's Asthma Program distributed the filters.

These air filter projects have been on the Health Department's wish list for a long time. "There's a difference between telling folks they need to create a clean air space during wildfire season and actually helping them make it happen. I started to talk with Climate Smart Missoula about a program like this a couple years ago, and they jumped all over it. I am beyond grateful for the opportunity to provide real relief to some of our most vulnerable residents during this incredibly challenging smoke season," said Sarah Coefield, air quality specialist with the Missoula City-County Health Department.

Partnerships made it happen. Amy Cilimburg, Executive Director of Climate Smart Missoula, says, "It's amazing what can be accomplished with such a collaborative effort, from generous funders to social service providers. We witnessed relief and many appreciative smiles as we plugged in these new filters. We wish we could have helped everyone. We'll be living with wildfire for years to come, and with such a generous community, we'll look to expand this program."

Because wildfire smoke is common in western Montana in the summer, some people may start to ignore the potential health risks. But it is still crucial to reduce your exposure. Use of a HEPA air filter, especially in the room where you sleep, helps everyone, but especially the most vulnerable: pregnant women, infants, children, people with heart and lung problems, and anyone over 65.

None of this work could happen without the leadership and generosity of all these partners. Climate Smart welcomes any partners who want to help with efforts to keep our most vulnerable residents healthy during unhealthy smoke conditions. We also acknowledge the significant discount provided by the Winix Company

which makes the HEPA filter model we chose. There are many good brands of filters, and we don't recommend any in particular. Climate Smart has these [tips](#) to help you choose and use the best filter for your home or business. The tips were developed with guidance from the University of Montana's School of Public and Community Health Sciences.

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