

“Helping our neighbors”: King County and community groups partner to promote air quality

As Tye Whitfield walked into the Radcliffe Place Senior Living center in Kent, residents welcomed her with smiles and open arms: proof of the trust she’s built over years volunteering her time and connecting people with resources through her nonprofit, Kingdom Gathering Outreach.

“We’re like family,” Whitfield said. “I bring them meals, I let them know when there are resources available, and I just spend time and get to know them and show that someone is here for them.”

Because of that trust, senior residents were open to attending a meeting she coordinated with King County to learn about indoor air quality. Whitfield was able to connect King County with people who needed air purifiers, but couldn’t afford them.

“A lot of our seniors have allergies, colds, heart disease, and other [health conditions], and I want to say around 85% of our seniors needed air filters,” Whitfield said.

King County partnered with Whitfield’s community-based organization and more than a dozen others to conduct the “Healthy Indoor Air Project,” funded by a grant from the Washington state Department of Ecology in connection with the state’s Climate Commitment Act.



Tye Whitfield and other volunteers with Kingdom Gathering outreach unload purifiers and filters to distribute to residents at Radcliffe Place Senior Living in Kent. (Erica Zucco/King County)

The state awarded King County \$6 million to go toward efforts that would improve air quality for people living near airports. Because of pollution from planes and a historic lack of investment, these neighborhoods face higher degrees of air pollution, a community concern supported by research from the University of Washington and Public Health – Seattle & King County. For decades, community members have advocated for action to address these impacts.

“We definitely want to focus on people who are the most vulnerable to pollution: those with respiratory issues, younger children, pregnant women, and seniors over the age of 65,” said Terrance Mayers, Indoor Air Quality Program Manager for Public Health - Seattle & King County.

As part of the project, King County partnered with local cities to plant and protect urban forests; contracted with local businesses to make upgrades to people’s homes; distributed more than 5000 air purifiers in collaboration with organizations like Whitfield’s; and created educational videos in several languages to help people understand actions they could take on their own.



Air purifier distribution event at Radcliffe Senior Living in Kent. (Erica Zucco/King County)

The County’s partnership with trusted local organizations was essential to the project, allowing people to receive information and assistance through the methods, languages, and techniques they were already comfortable with. The Korean American Chamber of Commerce in Federal Way served as one of those partners, in conjunction with the Ethnic Chamber of Commerce Coalition.

“This type of program is definitely helping our neighbors and people in the community in general,” vice president David Myoung-Kyu Oh said. “Some people were skeptical at first [that a high-quality air filter would be free of charge], but when they learned more and found out it was real, they were so excited and there was high demand. I had 50 purifiers to start from the County, but 90 people and counting asked about the program.”



Staff with the Korean American Chamber of Commerce load an air purifier and filters onto a dolly to distribute to a local community member. (Erica Zucco/King County)

Partner organizations gave input into the design of the program and received a stipend for their distribution work.

“Too many times we make decisions without the involvement of the people that are most impacted by it,” Mayers said. “Making sure they have a seat at the table [and] they have a voice is important. Now, not only are they working with us, they’re advocates for the type of work we’re doing.”

In addition to filter distribution and community education, grant funding was used to support weatherization projects in single family homes, adult family homes, and family home child cares near the airport. King County also oversaw projects to preserve or maintain green space in near-airport neighborhoods, such as the restoration of Southgate Park in Tukwila.

“This grant is going to bring in 600 conifers, which is the first tree planting to happen at this park, and urban forests are so important,” said Olena Perry with the City of Tukwila’s Green Tukwila partnership. “We talk a lot in Tukwila about [concerns with heat] because we have a lot of paved surfaces and rooftops, and we need these bands or large sections of forests that are going to create cooling not only for creeks, and the river, but also the land.”

While this project was time-limited due to the amount of available resources, King County plans to continue investing in similar projects with actions outlined in its Strategic Climate Action Plan.

"This Strategic Climate Action Plan advances ambitious climate action and builds on years of work to advocate for strong policies that deliver solutions and real benefits, especially for our frontline communities," King County Executive Shannon Braddock said. "Together, alongside community and partners, we are preparing for climate impacts while also building stronger, more resilient ecosystems."

To learn more about King County’s work to improve air quality and respond to climate impacts, visit kingcounty.gov/climate

Learn more about Indoor Air Quality:

Public Health recommends that everyone take action to improve their indoor air quality:

- Purchase one or more HEPA air filtration units. They can trap and remove up to 99% of dust and even viral particulates from the air.
- Cooking can increase indoor air pollution, especially when overheating oil or burning food. Use an exhaust fan and cook at lower temperatures when possible, or use electricity instead of gas.
- Even cleaning activities such as sweeping or dusting can stir up particles. Use a damp microfiber cloth or mop to clean instead.
- Open windows when possible. Visit the Washington state Department of Ecology’s air quality information site to check if the outdoor air is healthy.

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