

Federal workers compete for air in restrooms

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By **MIRIAM SILVER**

Courant Staff Writer

In the past month, workers on the seventh floor of the Abraham A. Ribicoff federal office building in Hartford have been making a lot more trips to the restroom.

It's nothing in the water, rather a little less of something in the air.

Since new federal regulations took effect Feb. 8 limiting smoking in federal offices to areas designated by signs, smokers have been scurrying for spots to light up because there are few such areas.

To the chagrin of smokers and non-smokers alike, the lack of designated areas has resulted in furtive smoking in bathrooms, hallways and temporarily empty rooms.

Workers at the two federal office buildings in Hartford — the Ribicoff building at 450 Main St. and the William Cotter building at 135 High St.— say the new regulations have prompted a resurgence of old animosities about smoking in offices, with restrooms now serving as the new battleground.

“With the new law, everybody goes into the ladies’ room. It is so bad you can’t breathe,” said an angry non-smoker who works for the Social Security Administration on the Ribicoff building’s seventh floor and who declined to have her name used. “They should designate areas for smokers.”

Down the hallway, a U.S. Bankruptcy Court employee admits she regularly takes her cigarette break by retreating to the restroom.

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"They just said 'no smoking,' and didn't set aside designated areas. What [the new law] is causing is 500 people sitting in the ladies' room and smoking," said the woman, who requested anonymity.

The new federal rule bans smoking in offices, corridors, meeting rooms and public areas — including bathrooms — unless a sign states otherwise. Terence Golden, administrator for the General Services Administration, which supervises federal buildings, tightened smoking rules after a recent spate of reports that second-hand smoke is harmful to non-smokers.

"The key is that smokers' fumes should not be inflicted upon the non-smoker," said William J. Diamond, regional administrator of the General Services Administration.

Individual agencies are left to decide on smoking, which means employees and the public can smoke only in designated areas in those buildings, Diamond said.

That has created confusion and inconsistency.

For instance, although Diamond said the rule means smoking in restrooms generally is prohibited, some employees are doing so at the Ribicoff building in Hartford because they say they have no other place to smoke.

Although some agencies have yet to decide on a policy, both federal buildings in Hartford have new signs that declare: "Smoking in Designated Areas Only." The signs are on the first floor of the seven-story Ribicoff building; one says smoking is allowed in the basement cafeteria.

But in one room frequently used by lawyers to interview cli-

ents, there are ashtrays and no signs permitting smoking, yet there are cigarette stubs in the cubbyhole of an empty desk drawer.

Dennis Iavarone, deputy in charge of the U.S. District Court, which occupies the second floor of the Ribicoff building, said people can smoke in the corridors. He said that is necessary for those waiting outside courtrooms.

But, Charles Cadman, assistant building manager for the General Services Administration in Hartford, which oversees the six federal buildings in Connecticut that house many of the 3,900 federal employees in the state, said smoking is not allowed in bathrooms, hallways or elevators.

A decision by the clerk's office of the federal bankruptcy court has meant no smoking for the public or the 13 employees. No workers interviewed wanted to give their names, but many said they were upset they were not given a designated place to smoke.

At the other end of the hall, about 50 Social Security Administration employees were prevented from smoking at their desks because of a grievance brought two years ago. But, they can smoke in a large, "break" room, much to the dismay of some non-smokers.

"I'm really happy with the new laws. I wish they'd stop smoking in the bathroom," non-smoker Susan Kanner, a Social Security service representative, said.

Lisa Elnicki, a Social Security employee who was a smoker until recently, said, "Even when I did smoke, I was in favor of not smoking in the office. It really doesn't bother me as long as you can still do it in the break room and cafeteria."