

The Perils of Secondhand Smoke

By Patricia Repetto, MEd

In March of this year, New York City (NYC) implemented the country's most restrictive legislation to date banning smoking in public places, including restaurants, bars, bingo parlors and even city-owned vehicles. Highlighting secondhand smoke as a workplace issue and claiming that smoke-free air is every employee's right, NYC, spearheaded by the Department of Health, overwhelmingly convinced city councilmen that secondhand smoke was an issue that needed to be dealt with for health as well as financial reasons. NYC employed some of this country's best trained epidemiologists who discovered that working an 8-hour shift in a smoky bar exposes bartenders to the same amount of carcinogens as smoking half a pack a day and that levels of pollution in a smoky bar were 20 times that of the Lincoln Tunnel at rush hour. Coupled with existing research that has shown that secondhand smoke exposure leads to a 30% increase in heart attacks, councilmen quickly realized the financial implications of the added health burden produced by secondhand smoke. What was once a far-shot in city councils and state legislatures nationwide is now becoming the norm and the saying, "If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere," is ringing true for public health officials considering the same type of smoke-free legislation elsewhere in the United States.

The Fall Of Tobacconism As We Know It In The USA:

In 1995, California became the first state to ban smoking in restaurants and followed with a smoking ban in bars in 1998. Delaware became the second state in 2002 to adopt similar legislation. Since the passing of the 2003 Smoke-Free Workplace Act in NYC, other large municipalities such as Houston and Boston, as well as states, such as New York and Maine, have declared similar legislation with many others considering the same action. The trend is catching on like wildfire and spreading to small towns, counties, municipalities and cities. While there is a lack of consistency among the smoking bans (some contain exemptions for owner-operated bars, outside dining areas, etc.), never before in this country has the

issue of secondhand exposure been debated in so many legislative houses simultaneously.

Warning: This Public Ban, Although Favorable To Your Health, May Not Be A Lasting Thing:

Despite the favorable trend towards smoke-free air, the resistance is very much alive and fighting to overturn each public smoking ban. The Tobacco Industry is front and center in the fight to repeal the bans, with efforts not visible to the human eye. The industry conducts the majority of its fighting in the coffers of city and state legislative houses, often lining the pockets of politicians to ensure a vote against the ban or for the inclusion of language in a legislative bill unrelated to public health. To add further insult to injury, the industry has created fictitious organizations, "front groups," that conduct non-random and unscientific public opinion polls designed to confuse the public. The survey/poll results always show indication of a negative effect of the smoking ban, whether it is lower restaurant/bar revenues, a decline in jobs or citizens displeased with the smoking ban. Furthermore, the front groups releasing these results are given names markedly similar to the names of legitimate organizations that are supportive of the bans, such as the Empire State Restaurant and Bar Association (fictitious) and not to be confused with the New York State Restaurant and Bar Association (legitimate). The end result is mass confusion among the public as to the true effectiveness of the smoking ban.

Closing Thoughts:

For those readers who live in states, cities and localities with public smoking bans, beware of the resistance that could be working to overturn these laws. Should you have any question as to the validity of a public opinion survey/poll that denounces the smoking ban, or you wish to find out more about the law in your geographical area, you can refer to www.smokecreeen.org or contact Joe Cherner at joe@smokefree.org.



Recent Publications by Tobacco Dependence Program Staff

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