

Position Paper

Smoking

Public health goals for our nation initiated by former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop include the vision of a smoke-free society by the year 2000. A smoke-free society was defined as “one in which smoking prevalence would be at a minimum and one in which smoking would be prohibited in public settings.” Much has been accomplished to achieve this goal. The number of adults in the United States who smoke has greatly diminished and continues to drop. However, much remains to be done. The number of children who start smoking continues to rise, especially the number of young women. The tobacco industry still markets relentlessly to young people by appealing images that portray smoking as an accepted norm in society. Media images of smokers feature glamorous young people in vigorous health. Realistic portrayals of persons suffering the disabling and sometimes disfiguring effects of smoking are rarely seen.

As society moves toward a smoke-free environment, much of the attention has focused on protection of the vast majority of non-smokers from the harmful effects of second hand smoke. An unprecedented grass roots effort led to the passage of local ordinances throughout California to restrict public smoking. Ultimately, with strong public support, a State law was passed that created a uniform policy on public smoking. The underlying philosophy is a simple one—the rights of people to breathe clean air always supersedes the right to smoke in public. There continues to be overwhelming public support for and compliance with the California law.

When the California Smoke Free Workplace law was passed in 1994, bars, taverns and gaming clubs were given until January 1, 1998 to become smoke free. There has been public debate about the need to include such establishments in the law. Many persons who patronize bars, taverns and gaming clubs do smoke. But the majority of people in the community do not smoke and have the right to breathe clean air in these establishments. Furthermore, these facilities are places of employment. These employees have the same rights as any other group of employees to be protected in their workplace. Tobacco has been designated as a Group A carcinogen with no safe level of exposure by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The Santa Cruz County Public Health Commission is committed to protecting the public's health. Protecting the rights of all persons to breath clean air is an important part of that commitment. The Commission supports educational efforts to ensure compliance with the California Smoke Free Workplace law and enforcement if necessary. The Commission also supports education programs to inform the public, especially our youth, about the dangers of smoking, and treatment services to help smokers overcome their addiction. As part of the community's responsibility to protect young people, the Commission supports special surveillance and monitoring activities to ensure that retail establishments do not sell tobacco to minors. A comprehensive approach, using education and enforcement will help us move forward toward the goal of a smoke-free society in the future.