

It's time to outlaw public smoking

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Alabama should join other states to protect public

The time has come to clean the air of the toxic effects of smoking in public spaces and work environments in Alabama. This past legislative session, companion bills in both the Alabama Senate (SB 155) and House of Representatives (HB 478) aimed to end the disparity of local ordinances that have attempted with varying success to reduce secondhand smoke by enforcing a statewide ban on smoking in public spaces.

The bills would have added Alabama to a growing list of smoke-free states with similar laws protecting citizens from the effects of secondhand smoke, leading to lives saved and reducing costs to taxpayers for tobacco-related, health-care expenses.

The Alabama chapter of the American College of Cardiology was proud to partner with the Alabama Coalition for a Tobacco Free Alabama in supporting the bills' passage, primarily because of the major impact smoking and secondhand smoke have on a person's health.

Cigarette smoking increases the chances of stroke, heart attack, vascular disease, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, sinusitis, gum disease, ulcers and cancer of the lung, bladder, mouth/pharynx, esophagus, cervix, kidney, larynx and pancreas. It is the No. 1 preventable cause of death, and is estimated to kill 442,000 Americans each year, shortening life expectancy on the average of 13.2 years for men and 14.5 years for women.

Direct health-care costs for smoking-related disease are estimated at \$75 billion per year, with an additional \$82 billion in lost productivity in the United States. In Alabama, the annual health-care costs directly attributed to smoking exceed \$1.17 billion, an average cost of \$459 to each household in the state.

The two bills in the Legislature stand to have the most effect on secondhand smoke, also known as involuntary smoking or passive smoking because nonsmokers can inhale the same chemicals, toxins and carcinogens in tobacco smoke inhaled by active smokers.

Two large studies in Helena, Mont., and Pueblo, Colo., have attributed a 27 percent to 40 percent reduction in the incidence of heart attacks in those cities to the institution of local smoke-free ordinances. Even a half hour of secondhand smoke exposure causes heart damage similar to that of habitual smokers. Secondhand smoke is the third-leading preventable cause of death in the United States, killing more than 53,000 nonsmokers each year.

Unfortunately, nonsmoking sections cannot eliminate the exposure of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke. Secondhand smoke also remains a significant occupational health hazard, particularly for food-service workers, who are at a 50 percent increased lung cancer risk because of tobacco-smoke exposure in the workplace.

The effect of secondhand smoke on children is clear, with asthma rates twice as common among children exposed to secondhand smoke. Bronchitis and ear infections are also more common among these children.

Where to call

Smoking cessation is the best way for smokers to reduce their chances of developing a serious illness. There are resources available to help Alabama smokers quit. The Alabama Tobacco Quitline (toll-free

number 800-QUIT-NOW) is a statewide telephone-based tobacco cessation service.

This service offers counseling to all Alabamians who need assistance quitting cigarettes and chewing tobacco, as well as self-help materials, referrals to local programs and discount coupons for nicotine replacement products.

Please join us in support of this bill in the future by encouraging your state legislators to vote to keep our public and work space air clean and healthy. In doing so, we will take a critical step that will serve to improve Alabama's health for generations to come.

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