

Moving Closer to Tobacco-Free Recreational Areas in Middlesex County Connecticut

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Summary

Tobacco remains one of the largest public health threats in Connecticut. Middlesex County Coalition on Community Wellness (CoCW) created a *Tobacco-free Parks Toolkit* to assist towns in the development of tobacco-free policies and ordinances for outdoor recreational areas. Against the backdrop of recent landmark tobacco-free policy announcements in private sector industries, Coalition outreach informing local elected officials about the toolkit has re-energized the conversation around the need for tobacco-free policy development and environmental change to achieve sustainable health benefits for the community.



I went to our town swimming area and someone threw a cigarette butt down on the ground—right in front of my child. I thought it was illegal to smoke at our parks and playgrounds, but it isn't. We need a policy.

-Jaime K., East Hampton Resident

Challenge

In Connecticut, 16% of residents 18 years and older—over 428,000 individuals—are current cigarette smokers. Despite successes made, tobacco is still responsible for killing more Connecticut residents than AIDS, drugs, homicide, and suicide combined (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2014). Studies have shown that secondhand smoke kills; in fact, secondhand smoke causes approximately 55,000 deaths per year among nonsmokers. Locally, more than 5,000 Connecticut residents die each year due to smoking and from exposure to secondhand smoke (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2014).

The Environmental Protection Agency has classified secondhand smoke as a *Class A Carcinogen*. This category is reserved for the most dangerous cancer-causing chemicals and it includes such toxins as benzene and asbestos. The *2010 Surgeon General's Report* concluded there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. Outdoors, cigarette smoke can be smelled up to 23 feet away. If people can smell smoke, they are inhaling cancer-causing and toxic chemicals.

Solution

Towns in Middlesex County offer dozens of local opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreation year-round, including parks, green spaces, trails and swimming opportunities, as well as more than 9,800 acres of state parks and forests. There is no uniform policy language to promote tobacco-free outdoor recreational areas in the county.

Tobacco-free policies and ordinances establish a community norm that tobacco use is unhealthy and unacceptable behavior. Public parks in Middlesex County promote healthy activities and are for the use and enjoyment of residents and visitors. Making our recreational areas tobacco-free makes common sense by:

- Protecting users from the well-documented dangers of secondhand smoke;
- Eliminating unsightly and unhealthy litter;
- Providing the opportunity to model tobacco-free behavior, a powerful tool in teaching children how to be healthy adults.

CoCW created a toolkit explaining the health concerns of tobacco use and benefits of tobacco-free outdoor spaces. Information about local authority, as granted through the Connecticut General Statutes, was included in the toolkit to highlight the legal authority of local government to create and enact local ordinances. Several model ordinances were included as examples. Letters of support from a large private outdoor sports adventure park, a regional youth camp, and local health directors throughout the county were also included in the toolkit.

A presentation made to chief elected officials generated much interest and discussion. Private beach associations have expressed interest in adopting tobacco-free ordinances. The Coalition has offered their support to anyone who wishes to present a tobacco-free policy to their local board.

Sustainable Success

With the creation of a document that includes specific language for municipalities, as well as through the multi-agency participation of Coalition members, it is expected that the tobacco-free toolkit will be used and referenced for years to come as the "go-to" document for tobacco-free policy development and sustainable change.

Get Involved

Contact the Middlesex County Coalition on Community Wellness to see how you can get involved. If you would like to support a tobacco-free recreational area policy in your neighborhood, contact Wendy Mis or Susan Dubb at the Chatham Health District at 860.365.0884.

Contact

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