

# Moving Closer to Tobacco-Free Recreational Areas in New London County Connecticut

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## Summary

Tobacco remains one of the largest public health threats in Connecticut. More than half of the municipal parks in New London County lack a tobacco-free rule, ordinance, or policy. ACHIEVE New London County Coalition created a *Tobacco-free Parks Toolkit* to assist towns in the development of tobacco-free policies and ordinances for outdoor recreational areas.

Toolkits were distributed to more than 50 elected officials, recreation commission members, and recreation directors in the County. As a result of their efforts, three towns (Groton City, New London, and Stonington) in New London County passed a tobacco policy or ordinance that bans smoking in certain outdoor parks, spaces, or playgrounds. In addition, 59 outdoor quality *Tobacco-free Parks* signs were purchased and posted in designated areas.



## Why wouldn't we want our parks to be tobacco free?

-Kristen King, Stonington Human Services Program Coordinator and  
Member of the Tobacco-Free Workgroup

## 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.

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, smoke can be smelled 23 feet away, and if they can smell it, people are inhaling cancer-causing and toxic chemicals.

## Solution

Towns in New London County offer numerous local opportunities to enjoy outdoor recreation year-round, including parks, green spaces, trails, swimming opportunities, as well as state parks and forests. Unfortunately, the county lacks uniform policy language to promote tobacco-free outdoor recreational areas to protect visitors.

Tobacco-free policies and ordinances establish a community norm that tobacco use is unhealthy and unacceptable behavior. Public parks in New London 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.

With funding from a Community Transformation Grant sponsored by the CT Department of Public Health, ACHIEVE New London County Coalition, led by Ledge Light Health District and Uncas Health District, created a toolkit highlighting 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.

Toolkits were distributed to more than 50 elected officials, recreation commission members, and recreation directors in the County. To date, three localities (Groton City, New London, and Stonington) in New London County passed a tobacco policy or ordinance that bans smoking in certain outdoor parks, spaces, or playgrounds. In addition, 59 outdoor quality *Tobacco-Free Parks* signs were purchased for these communities through the Community Transformation Grant and are posted in designated areas. The ACHIEVE Coalition Tobacco-Free Living Workgroup continues to support a number of municipalities that are considering the adoption of a tobacco-free parks policy or ordinance.

The towns that adopted a smoke-free policy or ordinance promoted their efforts in local newspapers to inform residents of the change and the health benefit to the community.

## 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 toolkits will be used and referenced for years to come as the "go-to" document for tobacco free policy development and sustainable change.

The posted *No Smoking* signs and continued community education through media outreach and advocacy from coalition members, continue to increase awareness of the ordinance among users of all of these locations providing continuity to what has been accomplished to date.

## Get Involved

Contact the ACHIEVE New London County Coalition to see how you can get involved. If you would like to support a tobacco-free recreational area policy in your neighborhood, contact the Ledge Light Health District, 860.448.4882.

## Contact

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