

Local Teen Advocates to Establish Smoke-free Environments in Putnam, Connecticut

JULY 2014

WINDHAM COUNTY, CONNECTICUT

Summary

Tobacco remains one of the largest public health threats in Connecticut. A local teen led a smoke-free effort in Putnam, a small rural town in Windham County, CT and worked closely with the parks and recreation commission, local health district, and local elected officials to present evidence that a smoking ban would benefit all town residents and visitors. Their combined actions resulted in the adoption of a self-enforcing outdoor smoke-free policy that includes posting smoke-free signage in town-owned parks, recreation facilities, open-spaces, trails, adjoining sidewalks and parking lots of town-owned parks.

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.



Putnam High School 2014 graduate Michael LaRochelle posts the first smoke-free sign as part of a smoke-free municipal outdoor spaces campaign adopted by the town of Putnam Recreation Commission. LaRochelle, who suffers from asthma, began his quest to have the town designate municipal properties as smoke-free when he was a sophomore in high school. The Northeast District Department of Health and HealthQuest Northeast CT, a local coalition of health and wellness partners, supported LaRochelle's efforts and provided funding through a *Community Transformation Grant* from the CDC and CT Department of Public Health to finance the signage.

“As the first sign went up, it was a relief to me knowing that so many people, particularly children, will benefit from this campaign. I did realize quite early through this experience that if you feel strongly about something, no matter how hard it might seem...as long as you keep fighting for what you believe in, it will work out in the end.”

—Michael LaRochelle

Solution

Michael LaRochelle, who is a 2014 graduate of Putnam High School, led a group of Putnam students and community stakeholders to discuss possible solutions to exposure to secondhand smoke in open public areas of the town. Michael suffers from asthma and could not believe he had to endure secondhand smoke when attending community events on town-owned properties. During his sophomore year, Michael started attending the Putnam Board of Selectman meetings to keep the smoke-free effort on the town agenda. During this time, he also worked with the Putnam PRIDE Coalition (Partnership to Reduce the Influence of Drugs for Everyone) and started a group called TRIAD (Teens Reducing the Influence of Alcohol and Drugs).

Over the next two years, Michael met with community and coalition partners, and state lawmakers including CT Senate President Pro Tempore Donald Williams, to advocate for smoke-free open spaces in his town. In December 2013 the town's Recreation Commission adopted the *Town of Putnam Smoke-Free Municipal Outdoor Spaces Campaign* - a self-enforcing outdoor smoke-free policy that includes the posting of signage in town-owned parks, recreation facilities, open spaces, trails, adjoining sidewalks and parking lots of town-owned parks.

The Northeast District Department of Health and its HealthQuest Northeast CT Coalition of health and wellness partners financed the signage through a Community Transformation Grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Connecticut Department of Public Health. On June 15, 2014, Michael was invited to post the first of 45 signs that will identify these smoke-free areas throughout the town of Putnam. In addition, the campaign is being promoted through local and social media. This accomplishment was made possible through the committed work of Michael and his community partners and the support they received from local and state agencies.

Putnam's approximately 9,300 residents will benefit from the actions taken by their town's recreation commission to adopt a self-enforcing outdoor smoke-free policy. In addition, visitors from surrounding towns who frequent parks, playgrounds, recreation areas, athletic facilities, and trails owned, leased, or controlled by the town of Putnam will also be able to enjoy smoke-free environments.

Get Involved

Anyone in Windham County, CT who is committed to healthy outdoor recreational opportunities for the use and enjoyment of families and visitors can become an advocate against secondhand smoke and unsightly and unhealthy cigarette and tobacco litter. This gives residents the opportunity to model tobacco-free behavior – a powerful tool in teaching children how to become healthy adults.

Sustainable Success

The *Smoke-Free Area* signs will serve as long-standing reminders of the importance of reducing exposure to smoke; promote social norms that discourage smoking and enhance continued efforts to curb tobacco use.

Furthermore, Michael, the Northeast District Department of Health, HealthQuest Northeast Connecticut, and Putnam elected officials have shared their success with many forms of media which will contribute to general public awareness and sustainability of this effort.

Contact

Linda J. Colangelo
Education and Communications Coordinator
Northeast District Department of Health
69 South Main Street, Unit 4
Brooklyn, CT 06234
860-774-7350 x. 14
lcolangelo@nddh.org