

The Washington Times-Herald

March 18, 2011

Forum calls for statewide smoke-free air law

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WASHINGTON — Daviess County residents attending a smoke-free air forum Wednesday are calling for Indiana legislators to pass a law that would make all workplaces in Indiana smoke-free, including restaurants, bars and casinos. It makes sense medically and economically — and it's just the right thing to do, agreed a panel of expert speakers at the forum in the Washington High School library.

“We cannot in all good conscious allow (secondhand smoke) to hurt our community,” said Rev. Lennie Lawrence of Christ United Methodist Church, pointing out that lower income families, African Americans, and women suffer most of the health effects of secondhand smoke exposure and smoking.

The panel discussion started with Marilyn McCullough of Thompson Insurance talking about the economic costs of secondhand smoke to businesses. She explained, not only does going smoke-free lower health insurance costs, it increases productivity.

“If you allow your smoking employees four 10-minute breaks every day, they actually work three weeks less per year than your nonsmoking employees,” said McCullough.

Also, businesses can save \$190 per 1,000 square feet per year in maintenance costs if they are smoke-free, she said.

Many bar owners are concerned that a smoke-free law would cause them to lose business. But bars and restaurants are already under many safety and health regulations regarding sanitation and cleanliness, and smoke-free regulations fall in that same category, said McCullough.

Bars and restaurants in Hoosier cities that have enacted local smoke-free ordinances and in the 28 states with smoke-free laws have not lost business, and some have actually gained because nonsmokers are the majority, she continued. Those studies that may contradict this information are closely tied to the tobacco industry and are not as trustworthy as the independent studies that show no negative economic impact from a smoke-free law, she said.

Panelist Jane Norton, RN, with the Daviess County Health Department, said secondhand smoke is actually more toxic than the smoke breathed by the smoker, and chemicals from cigarette smoke persist well beyond the time the smoker is in the room. Secondhand smoke cannot be contained in separated rooms or removed with ventilation systems, and no amount of secondhand smoke is safe, she said.

“Secondhand smoke laws need to be 100 percent to be effective,” she added.

Valerie Roark, a respiratory therapist who manages the cardiopulmonary, neurodiagnostics, and sleep

diagnostics department at Daviess Community Hospital, said secondhand smoke causes many diseases in nonsmokers, including heart disease, lung disease, and cancer. A smoke-free law that covers all workplaces drastically reduces heart attacks, she said.

“That’s huge! Smoking bans can have a substantial impact on public health,” she said, “and it’s measured in human lives.”

Rev. Lawrence finished the panel discussion by talking about his own experience with secondhand smoke. Both of his parents died from smoke-related illness, and he quit smoking when his children were young. But because of exposure to secondhand smoke during childhood and his own smoking, Lawrence now suffers from multiple health problems, including COPD and asthma.

Lawrence also talked about ministering to and consoling families who have lost children, parents, and siblings too early because of the devastating effects of secondhand smoke and smoking.

“Smoking is more than statistics, more than laws; it’s about lives turned inside out,” said Lawrence. “The question was asked, should the business owner be able to make the decision (whether to allow smoking). Let them talk to someone who has felt the effects. It destroys the bottom line of families.”

Lawrence encouraged the audience to tell restaurant owners when they decide to leave an establishment because of the secondhand smoke and to talk to friends and family members about the effects of secondhand smoke.

The evening concluded with presentations of awards to Washington Community Schools and 4 Seasons Entertainment Hall.

Sally Petty, coordinator of the Daviess County Tobacco Prevention Coalition, presented the Gary Sandifur Award to Superintendent Bruce Hatton and Assistant Superintendent Becky Dayton in honor of the school’s new policy, which prohibits tobacco use by all students, staff and visitors at all times on all school property.

Petty said the policy protects students and school employees from secondhand smoke and helps reduce youth smoking rates by setting a positive example.

Petty also presented the Smoke-Free Business Award to 4 Seasons Entertainment Hall in honor of their smoke-free policy.

Petty said their policy does a good job of protecting their employees and patrons from secondhand smoke. Dave Crooks of DLC Media accepted the award on behalf of business owner Jason Chapman, who could not be present due to a family emergency.

Crooks remarked that 4 Seasons’ smoke-free policy did not hinder a crowd of 1,000 people from enjoying a live concert there recently.