



Secondhand smoke: Not everyone has a choice but Wyoming legislators do

By Marc Homer, Kids Count Director, Wyoming Children's Action Alliance

Smoking and secondhand smoke continues to pose a significant health risk to Wyoming citizens, including youth, pregnant mothers, hospitality industry workers, and restaurant and bar patrons. The public health costs are a burden to taxpayers and employers. Wyoming's legislature now has the opportunity to enact a resolution that will result in healthier birth outcomes and many lives saved.

In 1996, 20 percent of Wyoming mothers smoked during pregnancy. Ten years later the number had not changed. Twenty percent, or 1528 of the 7640 babies born in 2006 were to mothers who smoked during pregnancy. The percentage of mothers who smoked during pregnancy in Wyoming is nearly double the national average.

The percentage of Wyoming mothers who smoked during pregnancy varies from as low as two percent in Teton County to as high as 28 percent in Platte County. In one of Wyoming's two metropolitan areas, Natrona County, 26 percent of mothers smoked during pregnancy in 2006.

Proving that Wyoming has done a better job discouraging youth smoking over the years, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey reports the percentage of youth who smoked a whole cigarette before the age of 13 dropping from 29.1 percent in 1997 to 19 percent in 2007. The national average for this statistic in 2007 was significantly lower than Wyoming's, 14.2 percent. The percentage of current youth smokers in Wyoming, those who have smoked at least one cigarette within the last 30 days, was 20.8 percent, statistically no different than the national average.

Research demonstrating the risk of smoke filled public venues to hospitality industry workers and the restaurant and bar patrons that they serve has been conducted in Wyoming. In 2005, UW contracted with nationally recognized biophysicist James Repace, Mark Travers of the Roswell Park Cancer Institute and several respected labs to study the risk of secondhand smoking in Laramie bars before and after the smoking ban. For this study, 13 volunteers spent 8 hours straight in some of Laramie's then smoke-filled bars and bowling alley. Here is an excerpt from the final report:

“Combined lung cancer and heart disease mortality from secondhand smoke (SHS) exposure and SHS air pollution exposure was estimated using published SHS risk-assessment models. Study results predict that Laramie's smoking ban will have the effect of preventing the premature death of an estimated three workers lives annually among 3900 hospitality workers, and preventing one premature death among bar patrons every 15 months per 10,000 patrons. Risk levels estimated from pre-ban cotinine levels [the preeminent atmospheric and biological marker for secondhand smoke] found in study participants exceeded OSHA *Significant Risk of Material Impairment of Health* levels for all visitors to all venues prior to Laramie's smoking ban.

“This risk can be expressed in terms of respirable particle air pollution levels from secondhand smoke. Controlling for background levels of air pollution, pre-ban SHS air pollution personal exposure levels of bar patrons show that based on the U.S. EPA Air Quality Index, 80% of the bar venues in pre-ban Laramie were ‘unhealthy for sensitive groups’, ‘unhealthy for all groups’ in 60% of bar venues, and ‘very unhealthy’ in 25% of bar venues...Results of this study show that since the implementation of the smokefree law in all Laramie workplaces, cotinine levels in bar patrons have dropped nearly 90%.”

I've heard the argument that people should have the choice to smoke at bars and restaurants, bowling alleys, and hotels. Children however do not have a choice when their parents take them to smoky restaurants, restaurants with attached bars, bowling alleys, or hotels.

Waiters, bartenders, and other hospitality industry workers like to stay employed and earn their living—they go where the work is. Many are adolescents. Many are women, some of whom are working pregnant. Even if one person has the opportunity to voluntarily move to a smokefree workplace, a new employee will have to step into that “unhealthy” or “very unhealthy” smoke-filled position, resulting in no net savings of lives or healthcare dollars.

Our elected officials in Cheyenne can choose to vote against the proposed statewide smokefree resolution and let the scientific reports continue to pile up while more people suffer diminished health and premature death due in large part from the smoking of others.

Alternatively, Wyoming's legislators can choose to act courageously and take action on the clear body of evidence that has been amassed since researchers began studying the health hazards caused by secondhand smoke, and start saving lives and reducing health costs in the Cowboy state.



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