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News and voices from the Last Frontier

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[Home](#) > Statewide workplace smoking ban looks to drum up support in Alaska

[Suzanna Caldwell](#) ^[1]

February 3, 2014

Main Image:

[Cigarette butts](#) ^[2]

Main Image Caption:

About half of Alaska residents are protected by workplace smoking bans, but a new movement hopes to get that up to 100 percent by increasing education efforts.

About half of Alaska's population lives in a community with a workplace smoking ban, but the other half doesn't. While that's a good sign for supporters of smoke-free workplaces in Alaska, there's been a push in recent years to make things even better for them.

That's why organizations like the American Lung Association and American Cancer Society are pushing for a statewide smoke-free workplace law in the 49th state.

Nationally, 30 states and the District of Columbia have statewide workplace smoking bans. In Alaska, roughly a dozen communities have bans of their own. The Municipality of Anchorage, home to about 300,000 people -- a little less than half of the state's population -- has a smoking ban. There's also one covering the 30,000 people who live in Juneau, the state capital. Even smaller communities like Bethel, Valdez, Unalakleet, Dillingham, Haines and [Palmer](#) have instituted bans ^[3] in recent years.

Those have been good first steps, but Emily Nenon, Alaska government relations director with the American Cancer Society's Cancer Action Network, said that's about all most Alaska communities can do when it comes to smoking bans. While some smaller cities could institute bans under their city's charters, some of the state's most populated boroughs -- including the Fairbanks North Star, Matanuska-Susitna and Kenai Peninsula - - do not have the power to manage public health. Without health powers, a borough cannot implement a ban.

"We've gotten about as far as we can get with the powers that they have," Nenon said.

That's creating a disparity. In the Mat-Su, for example, the city of Palmer has a ban, but the city only encompasses five square miles of the borough's 25,000 square miles. Businesses outside the city are welcome to allow to smoking under the current law, meaning customers don't have to travel far if they want to smoke.

But instituting health powers are a bit of a Catch-22 for borough assemblies. While they could decide to have health powers -- usually through voter referendum -- those can come with more responsibilities than simply a smoking ban, Nenon said.

"(Boroughs) are more interested in the state creating that level playing field," she said.

Plus, there's the entire unorganized borough, which consists of about 70,000 of the state's residents. While many communities in that borough have signed on as having smoke-free workplaces, most of the smaller ones have not.

So in an effort to get the law moving, the smoke-free Alaska campaign is looking to increase public awareness and drum up support.

At an Anchorage Chamber of Commerce Make It Monday luncheon in an effort to court support from Anchorage businesses, Nenon pointed out that American Cancer Society study found that Alaska would save \$5.04 million in treatment for lung cancer and heart illnesses due to smoking in the first five years of a statewide ban. Of that, half a million would be Medicaid savings.

Marge Stoneking, Alaska director of the American Lung Association in Anchorage, said studies show that when smoking bans are put in place, business either remains flat or increases. An Alaska Department of Health and Social Services [study in 2012](#) ^[4] found that one in five bar patrons in Anchorage and Juneau found themselves visiting bars more often once smoking bans were in place.

"It shows that businesses can be smoke-free without hurting the bottom line," she said.

So far, 350 businesses and community groups in Alaska have come out in support of the smoking ban.

While buzz is still building for the statewide effort -- and has been building for years -- no legislation has been introduced yet that would create a state ban.

Nenon thinks the reason may be that so many people live in communities with smoking bans is that they forget other places lack them. She encouraged people to contact their legislators or to sign a resolution of support for a smoke-free Alaska.

With all the studies noting the benefits of smoke-free workplaces, Nenon said the biggest issue moving forward will be making sure people understand the benefits of the law. Since Anchorage passed its smoking ban in 2007, she said, no tickets have been issued to violators. Incidents have been handled with simple phone calls or letters reminding people about how the law works.

"If the laws are well understood, enforcement is easy," she said.

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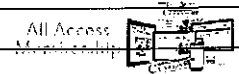
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Hospital CEO supports 'take it outside' legislation

Posted: March 6, 2014 - 9:40am

By Rick Davis

CEO, Central Peninsula Hospital

I have watched the smoke-free campaign make significant ground over the last several years. As a healthcare professional, I would be remiss if I didn't support a proposed law that would prohibit smoking in all indoor workplaces, businesses and public places. Of course the reason this legislation is being proposed is to prevent non-smokers from being exposed to second hand smoke. We now have plenty of science to support the fact that second hand smoke is dangerous. Just look up The Health Consequences of Smoking report. It's all there; I don't need to recite facts and figures as we all now know that smoking is a major threat to our public health.

I know we do things differently up here in Alaska and don't want or need anyone telling us what to do. Asking people to "take it outside" is a reasonable compromise to protect other people's health from the effects of second hand smoke. Much of Alaska has already adopted similar smoke-free laws but many areas remain in Alaska where they do not have health powers to enact such a law. The legislation introduced doesn't prohibit smokers from being hired or anything like that. They will just have to "take it outside" and away from an entrance or air intake.

We have enacted a smoke-free campus policy at our hospital and it was received well upon implementation. I suspect businesses that will be required to go smoke-free under the proposed legislation will enjoy the same results. People will thank you, just as they did at our hospital. This is not a Republican or Democrat issue, it's a health issue. Please support House Bill 360 and Senate Bill 209.

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We have the best fresh air in the nation

Posted: Sunday, March 23, 2014 12:00 am

To the editor:

I can't express enough how nice it is to be able to breathe clean, smoke-free air in my town, thanks to our local smoke-free ordinance.

For the first time in 40 years we are now dining out in a couple of the local bars that have good food and clean air. I know they appreciate the extra business and I am spreading the word to my friends and customers about their new opportunities here in their own town. If you don't have to drive to the next town or all the way to the city for dinner, you just cut your carbon emissions — good for your health and the planet — and you just beefed up your local economy and saved time. Smoke-free is exponentially good for a healthy body and a healthy economy!

But what about e-cigarettes? They might seem innocuous as they are odorless and don't fill up ashtrays, but they do pollute the air for nonsmokers. If you sprayed fragrance-free hair spray in a public space you would be polluting the air around you with a barrage of chemicals that could cause an allergic reaction in some folks. E-cigarettes are much the same with the exception that studies have shown some to contain carcinogens and nicotine in their emissions. Without some form of regulation we have no way of knowing if the brand used by a patron is polluting our breathing space with these emissions. That kind of regulation is a federal issue.

We can help prevent this problem by establishing smoke-free regulations at the state level and set a standard for local legislation to follow.

No one wants to breathe in carcinogens. Nicotine? It's an addictive substance that people have a choice to burden themselves with. But the public air space belongs to people who have a choice not to breathe their pollution. Please consider regulations to treat e-cigarettes as we do tobacco-based cigarettes. If the state buildings are smoke-free, why shouldn't the state provide comprehensive regulations for a smoke-free Alaska? We have the best fresh air in the nation.

Brooke G. Heppinstall

Palmer

Lung health groups hoping to breathe fresh air into Alaska

By Weston Morrow wmorrow@newsminer.com | Posted: Monday, March 24, 2014 12:00 am

An earlier version of this article stated the American Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation was lobbying for the legislation when it is actually the organization's lobbying arm, Americans for Nonsmoker's Rights.

FAIRBANKS — The American Lung Association and Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights are teaming up in an effort to bring an end to second-hand smoke deaths.

The two organizations are cooperating to help push legislation through the state legislature that would ban smoking in commercial establishments throughout the state. Such prohibitions exist in certain municipalities already, such as Anchorage, but for the vast majority of the state, including Fairbanks, there is no sweeping ban.

Smoking is prohibited statewide in certain areas already, such as school grounds and in many workplaces, but not in restaurants and bars. The Lung Association and American's for Nonsmoker's Rights feel restaurants and bars should not be treated as exceptions to the workplace bans.

“We want to protect the health of everyone and think that everyone has the right to breathe smoke-free air, especially if you’re working indoors,” said Octavia Harris, health education manager for the Lung Association’s Fairbanks office.

The state legislation, HB 360 and SB 209, were both filed in their respective houses Feb. 26. The bills have support from both sides of the aisle, with cosponsors from each party, a positive sign for the legislation’s supporters.

The bill’s supporters claim to have the backing of more than 400 Alaska businesses and more than 75 Alaska Native groups.

Time is running short for the bill, however. The 28th legislature ends midway through April, and any bills not passed by then will have to be reintroduced and run through the legislative process in the 29th legislature. In the Senate, the bill sits in the state affairs committee awaiting a hearing. In the House, it was referred to the health and social services committee, where it is scheduled for a hearing at 3 p.m. Tuesday.

The Lung Association just recently opened a branch in Fairbanks in the fall. The organization has had a presence in Alaska for several years but previously only had its office in Anchorage.

Harris said that, for an area like Fairbanks North Star Borough, which doesn't have the authority to enact health requirements such as a smoking ban, the statewide law is especially important.

"A lot of people thought that we were already smoke-free in a lot of places and were surprised to find that there were a number of places that were not," Harris said.

Char Day, program manager for the American Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation, said that she has to limit the places she can go in places like Fairbanks so as not to trigger her asthma.

"Normally, I don't have to worry about where I go, but here I have to be aware so much of where I go," Day said, "and it would just be wonderful to be able to go anywhere indoors in the state of Alaska and not worry about having an asthma attack."

Harris and Day said they don't believe the ban would be an intrusion on people's rights. They don't want to force anyone to stop smoking, they said, but to do so outside if they must smoke.

"It's about making a choice that is going to be best for everyone, not just one or two individuals," Harris said when asked if they felt it was reasonable to expect smokers to go outside in places like the Interior during winter.

"It's not about the smoker. It's about the smoke, and it's about simply asking them to take it outside."

Contact staff writer Weston Morrow at 459-7520. Follow him on Twitter:

@FDNMschools.

Supports statewide smoke-free workplace

Posted: Monday, March 24, 2014 11:59 pm

To the editor:

As a health practitioner in the Valley, I am in support of passage of a statewide smoke-free workplace law to protect all Alaskans from the dangers of secondhand smoke. This proposed bill is part of the current legislative session. According to the 2014 Surgeon General's report "The Health Consequences of Smoking," the science is clear. There is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke.

Those who choose to smoke do so freely and willingly. Most smokers understand the risks associated with that choice. But those who are exposed to secondhand smoke in the workplace, many of whom have limited employment options, can suffer from the same consequences as the smoker.

The inclusion of e-cigarettes in this law is an important element. There is no scientific evidence showing that they are safe or that they can help smokers quit. A 2009 study done by the FDA found cancer-causing substances in several of the e-cigarette samples tested. Additionally, Food and Drug Administration tests found nicotine in some e-cigarettes that claimed to contain no nicotine. Extensive study is needed on these relatively new products before they should be considered safe. At this point, much of the research suggests that they are not safe at all.

Unfortunately, I see the long-term effects of smoking and secondhand smoke in people of all ages. These are preventable conditions that increase health care costs to non-smokers and smokers. In fact, many of the chronic diseases in my practice that I see today are the result of lifestyle choices we make each and every day. The elimination of smoke in our workplaces and public spaces is one way we can make a very large positive impact on health and healthcare for our future.

Please join me in urging our Valley legislative delegation to pass a statewide smoke-free workplace law this year.

Jill K. Valerius, MD

Palmer

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[Home](#) > 10 years in the making, smoke-free workplace bill reaches Alaska Legislature

[Suzanna Caldwell](#) ^[1]

March 25, 2014

Main Image:

[No-smoking sign in bar](#) ^[2]

Main Image Caption:

Workplace smoking bans are in effect in Alaska communities that comprise about half the state's population. Proponents of a statewide ban have a bill in the Legislature, but opponents have been vocal in their testimony against the proposed law.

For more than a decade, anti-smoking advocates have fought to make workplaces smoke-free. They started small, working at the local level, steadfastly bringing indoor smoking bans first to Bethel in 1998, and then slowly but surely to other communities in Alaska. In all those years, they've managed to cover about half of the state's population.

But advocates say they've done about all they can when it comes to regulating smoking at the local level, and now it's time to think bigger -- statewide big.

Tuesday the Alaska House Health and Social Services committee heard House Bill 360 -- sponsored by Anchorage Rep. Lindsey Holmes -- which would prohibit smoking in indoor workplaces. It's the furthest a statewide workplace smoking ban has made its way through the Legislature, something that in some ways has been intentional, according to Mike Gutierrez, Alaska grassroots relationship manager for the Alaska American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network.

"This is the first time we've felt like we had the ability to have a bill introduced, much less get one passed," he said.

It's been a slow build, focusing on education and getting smoking laws passed in individual Alaska communities. Since the first ban in Bethel, smaller communities like Valdez, Unalakleet, Dillingham, Haines and Palmer have passed them, as have larger ones -- including bans covering the 30,000 residents of the state's capital in Juneau, along with Anchorage, Alaska's largest city and home to about a third of the state's population.

But even with those bans, plenty of other Alaskans are not covered. Second-class boroughs, like the Matanuska-Susitna, Kenai Peninsula and Fairbanks North Star borough do not have health powers and cannot implement smoking bans borough-wide. The unorganized borough, which includes 70,000 Alaskans and communities like Dillingham, Unalaska and Cordova, also cannot enact a smoking ban. The Legislature is supposed to serve as the governing body for the borough, though such a meeting has never been held in more than 50 years of statehood. A statewide ban would cover those communities and "level the playing field," Gutierrez said.

Marge Stoneking, Alaska director of the American Lung Association, has been with the organization for the last 10 years and watched that slow and steady change towards greater acceptance of smoking bans.

She noted that the Anchorage ban, first passed in 2001 and again with a second, more comprehensive version in 2006, has really helped change attitudes in Alaska. That wasn't immediately clear, she said, until Anchorage residents turned down a voter initiative that would amend some of the more comprehensive elements of the law by an overwhelming majority (76 percent came out against the initiative). Stoneking said that turnout showed a marked change.

"That was huge in terms that people get it and (smoke-free workplaces) are important to them," she said.

She also noted that a University of Alaska Anchorage Institute of Social and Economic Research report found overwhelming support from local businesses in Anchorage that have gone smoke-free. It also noted that in the years since the ban, no citations have actually been written against the law. So far, more than 400 businesses across the state have signed pledges in support of smoke-free workplaces, from large corporations like Doyon Ltd. to smaller "mom and pop" stores.

"That's a good indication that this just is accepted," Stoneking said.

That's something that Holmes, the bill's sponsor, acknowledged. She called the bill the "take it outside" bill, and noted it only applies to workplaces and that as far as she can find, the law is mostly "self-policing."

"Which is the best kind, as far as I'm concerned," she said.

Opposition testimony strong

In the hearing, however, many citizens came out in opposition of the bill. Many were against the the inclusion of e-cigarettes in the bill, saying science has not shown whether the vapor devices are dangerous. Even before, owners of a smoke shop in Soldotna created a [YouTube video opposing](#) ^[3] the Senate version of the bill.

Angela Carroll, owner of Glacier Vapors, an e-cigarette store in Palmer, said a big part of her business comes down to "try before you buy." If the law passes, it will undoubtedly affect her business.

"It will kill the shops," she testified. "Why not give vaping a chance?"

Dale Fox, the president and CEO of Alaska CHARR, the cabaret, hotel, restaurant and retail association, testified against the bill. He said a ban on smoking is essentially a ban on bars. People choose to go into bars, he said, and bars should be able to make the choice to have or not have smoking. He said while anti-smoking proponents have invested in ad campaigns saying non-smoking policies are good for business, he's heard that some establishments have lost up to 30 percent of their businesses when smoking bans are enacted.

"If legislators think less government is better, they will not vote for this bill," he said.

Citing the lateness in the day, the committee kept testimony open on the bill but cut it off after only a few Alaskans spoke, to continue on a later date.

Source URL: <https://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140325/10-years-making-smoke-free-workplace-bill-reaches-alaska-legislature>

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Advocacy groups voice support for Alaska Smoke-Free Indoor Workplaces bill

ANCHORAGE, Alaska— Local advocacy groups – AARP, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, and the Alaska Native Health Board – are backing a bill that would make all indoor workplaces in Alaska smoke-free, saying it would protect the health and safety of all workers and business patrons.

"Only half of residents already live in communities with smoke-free workplace laws. A smoke-free Alaska would create healthier environments and benefit business employees and customers. Everyone has the right to breathe smoke-free air," said Marge Stoneking, Alaska Director, American Lung Association.

The Alaska Smoke-Free Indoor Workplaces bill was introduced Wednesday by Representative Lindsey Holmes (HB 360) and Senator Peter Micciche (SB 209), and would prohibit smoking in all indoor workplaces, businesses and public spaces. Individuals who choose to smoke will have to "take it outside" in order to protect others from the effects of secondhand smoke.

"The U.S. Surgeon General has concluded that there is no risk-free exposure to secondhand smoke. Scientific studies have proven that smoke-free laws save lives – the incidence of heart attacks decrease after they are implemented," said Dr. Bob Urata, a physician and volunteer for the American Heart Association. A 2006 report by the Surgeon General, "The Health Consequences of Smoking," reports that non-smokers exposed to secondhand smoke increased their risk of heart disease and lung cancer, and called it a major cause of preventable deaths.

"Four out of 5 adults in Alaska support smoke-free workplaces, and businesses throughout the state have pledged their support for a statewide law," said Emily Nenon, Alaska State Director, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. The coalition reports that more than 400 businesses and community organizations have expressed their support, which are listed on the website, www.SmokeFreeAlaska.com.

Posted: March 5, 2014

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