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Guest editorial: Think of staff at smoky bars

BY SHELLEY COURINGTON • DECEMBER 15, 2009

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Other Views

Many smokers and even nonsmokers wonder why there is a push to strengthen Tennessee's anti-smoking laws.



Shelley Courington


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They argue that many restaurants are already smoke-free and that adults should be able to choose whether to go to a 21-and-up establishment that allows smoking. What they don't take into account are the people — moms, dads, sons and daughters — who provide for themselves and their families by working in 21-and-up restaurants. These Tennesseans are exposed to the secondhand smoke of their customers day in and day out, and though they might prefer to work in a healthier environment, in today's economy there aren't a lot of opportunities. Instead, they settle for working in a harmful environment.

Secondhand Smoke Not Safe

Over the past 10 years, the Campaign for a Healthy and Responsible Tennessee (CHART) has been a strong advocate for all Tennesseans, pushing hard for smoke-free workplace legislation. In 2007, we scored a major victory in our fight to save lives with passage of the Non-Smokers Protection Act. While the law eliminates smoking in most public places in the state, it still allows for exemptions for 21-and-up venues, among others, leaving many employees at risk of the harmful effects of tobacco. With more than 10,000 Tennesseans dying each year from smoking-related causes, we can't afford to wait. To ensure every Tennessean has a safe work environment, these exemptions must be removed.

The surgeon general stated there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke, leaving employees working at over-21 venues at risk of a long list of health problems. Secondhand smoke

has long been linked to lung disease, with the most recent figures placing Tennessee as the fourth-highest state for lung cancer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. New findings by the Institute of Medicine also show secondhand smoking causes heart problems. A recent *USA Today* article

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goes so far as to say smoking bans can drastically reduce the number of heart attacks — sometimes by as much as 17 percent within a year.

As we move into the 2010 legislative session, despite the lack of funding for cessation and prevention programs, we will be working tirelessly with lawmakers to remove the 21-and-up exemption. To those people who still ask why we need to strengthen anti-smoking laws, I point to the 1,230 adult nonsmokers who die each year in Tennessee from secondhand smoke. Aren't these lives worth saving?

The Campaign for a Healthy and Responsible Tennessee is a membership-based grassroots coalition with a central mission of improving the quality of life for all Tennesseans by preventing disease, disability and death caused by tobacco use. If you're interested in joining our efforts, visit www.tnchart.org.

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Shelley Courington is the executive director of CHART.

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