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Heidi Low: Smoke-free laws protect workers' health

READER'S VIEW SMOKING

BY HEIDI LOW - Idaho Statesman

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Idaho needs to catch up with our neighboring states - Utah, Montana, Washington and Oregon. As of July, more than 350 communities and 24 states have implemented smoke-free workplace policies. While Idaho law protects many employees from the dangers of secondhand smoke, we do not protect bar workers and those who work in small businesses with fewer than five employees.

The goal of Smokefree Idaho is to assure all employees protection from the dangers of secondhand smoke, because the health hazards are real and measurable. Did you know that secondhand smoke contains 69 cancer-causing chemicals, including formaldehyde, arsenic, cyanide and carbon monoxide? Besides cancer, secondhand smoke can cause or aggravate a wide range of health issues, including respiratory infections, asthma and heart disease. No one should have to choose between a job and good health.

Passing local clean indoor air ordinances protects all workers from these dangers. We firmly believe in each individual's responsibility to make their own choices as long as those choices don't adversely affect others. When someone smokes inside a workplace or other public place, those around them are forced to breathe in toxic chemicals. The evidence is clear: 220 Idahoans die each year as a result of exposure to secondhand smoke. Studies also show that nonsmokers working in smoky environments double their risk of getting lung cancer.

It should come as no surprise that smoke-free laws prove beneficial to the community. Such policies decrease absenteeism among nonsmoking employees and increase productivity. At least 10 studies demonstrate a substantial decrease in heart attacks in conjunction with comprehensive laws. More than 23 studies also demonstrate there is no significant adverse economic impact.

Tobacco use costs Idaho lives and money. Beyond all the statistics that prove the public health hazards, tobacco use costs Idaho \$319 million a year, which translates into a \$542 burden for every taxpaying household.

Maybe it's the combination of the science demonstrating the health hazards and the cost to Idahoans that gives Smokefree Idaho the support of the majority of Treasure Valley residents, as demonstrated through the overwhelming response from volunteers, petition signers and a poll. In fact, 73 percent of Treasure Valley voters support a law that would prohibit smoking in most places, including bars, and 85 percent of those polled believed all workers should be protected from exposure to secondhand smoke. The time to protect all Idaho workers from a proven health hazard is now.

Heidi Low is the Idaho director of government relations for the American Cancer Society's Cancer Action Network and outreach coordinator for Smokefree Idaho. More details are at www.smokefreeidaho.org.