

State again fails anti-smoking tests

Group cites progress, however

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JOURNAL REPORTER

Tuesday, January 9, 2007

North Carolina has made progress on anti-smoking issues in the past year but still scores a failing grade.

That's according to an annual report card issued by the American Lung Association, released today.

The state that produces the most tobacco in the nation earned straight "F"s in smoke-free air, cigarette taxes, youth access to tobacco products and in the amount of money spent on tobacco prevention and control.

"It's a comparison to the rest of the country," said Deborah Bryan, the president of the American Lung Association of North Carolina, which has issued the report cards for the past five years. North Carolina received all Fs last year, too, she said.

Still, she said, the state has made strides in recent years, such as increasing the cigarette tax from 5 cents to today's 35 cents a pack - the national average is \$1. More restaurants are doing away with smoking sections. More money is being spent on anti-smoking ads, "yet we used to spend nothing," Bryan said, "and we are starting to see teen smoking rates decline."

Bryan said she is proud of what North Carolina has accomplished, considering the state's ties to tobacco as a living and a way of life. Virginia and Kentucky, two other states where tobacco has deep roots, also scored all Fs.

"Now, I think we see more and more people expecting to eat in a smoke-free restaurant," Bryan said. "A good part of it is that our state has grown so much. So that means you've got a lot of people coming from other places. And many of those people have had cleaner public environments."

But North Carolina will spend only about \$18.9 million on smoking prevention and control this fiscal year. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control suggest about \$42.6 million, based on the state's size and population, the report said.

Too much money, Bryan said, goes to such projects as the Golden LEAF Fund, which focuses on distributing economic-development grants to areas of the state that have traditionally relied on a tobacco economy. Among other local projects, Golden LEAF money has have been given to Triad community colleges to help train Dell Inc. employees and to Wake Forest University's Piedmont Triad Research Park for infrastructure costs.

Fewer North Carolinians are lighting up. Just fewer than 23 percent of adults in North Carolina smoke, according to the association, down from 23.3 percent last year and compared with 20.9 percent nationwide. North Carolina's smoking rate is lower among high-school students - about 20 percent. The national rate is 23 percent.

Officials at Reynolds American Inc. could not be reached for comment.

Most North Carolina public-school districts have tobacco-free campuses. People who start smoking

when they're young are more likely to become addicted than those who start when they are older, Bryan said. "So having an environment that does not support smoking is a key factor."

Hospitals around the state, including Wake Forest University Baptist Medical and Forsyth Medical centers, are moving to ban the use of tobacco products.

The American Lung Association doesn't want smoking to be an option at public places, an issue they plan to push in North Carolina during the next legislative session. The General Assembly will reconvene at the end of January, and Rep. Hugh Holliman, D-Davidson, plans to introduce broad anti-smoking legislation, according to newspaper reports.

Smoking in most public and work places is prohibited in 13 states and Washington, D.C., and three more states have passed similar laws that have yet to take effect, the American Lung Association report said.

"The smoker can choose when and where they smoke," Bryan said, "but none of us can choose when and where we breathe."

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