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State Study Committee Acknowledges Secondhand Smoke as a Deadly Contributing Factor in Louisiana's Least Healthy State Rating; Cites Deaths, Illness and Exorbitant Costs as Reasons for Legislative Action

A comprehensive 20-page report blasting the current loopholes in the state's Smoke-free Air Act shows secondhand smoke is still a major contributing factor in smoking-related deaths, contributing to Louisiana's dubious distinction as the least healthy state in America, while costing citizens and taxpayers billions of dollars each year.

The results were reported by a special committee that was appointed last year by the Legislature to study the policy gap in Louisiana's 12-year-old Clean Indoor Air Act. That law prohibited smoking in most public areas including workplaces, universities and restaurants. However, under pressure from the tobacco and gaming industries, lawmakers notably omitted bars, gaming establishments, and other special interests such as nursing homes from the law. Since implementation of the Act in January 2007, only 22% of the state's population has been covered by comprehensive ordinances that address those exemptions and ensure that all workplaces, including bars and gaming establishments are providing smoke-free environments for their employees and patrons.

Raegan Carter is a spokesperson for Smoke-free Louisiana, a coalition of organizations tasked with informing lawmakers and the public of the harmful effects of tobacco. She, along with Claudia Rhodas, Director of the Southern Region, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, presented information for the report that shows tobacco use in Louisiana not only directly causes deaths and illnesses throughout our state, but presents an incredible financial burden for businesses, families and ALL taxpayers.

Rhodas says 7,200 Louisianians die each year from their own smoking with costs to taxpayers in the hundreds of millions of dollars. She says tobacco use in the state kills more people than alcohol, AIDS, automobile accidents, illegal drugs, murders and suicides combined.

Carter noted that Louisiana has now had 11 regular or special legislative sessions in the past three years with most of the attention directed at addressing budget shortfalls. She says Medicaid costs due to smoking were more than \$800 million last year alone.

“I hope this report sheds some much needed light on addressing our priorities in this state. People are getting sick or dying because we have loopholes in our smoke-free air laws. Just think of all the good that could be done if we weren’t flushing so much smoking-related health care expenditure money down the drain,” she says.

Specific recommendations in the report include: Removing the smoking exemption for bars and gaming establishments, removing the exemption for nursing home establishments that allow smoking inside the facility, increasing the hotel/motel percentage to require ALL rooms be smoke-free which is better aligned with industry standards, prohibiting indoor smoking during Mardi Gras Balls, prohibiting indoor smoking during tobacco expos at convention centers and including e-cigarettes in a comprehensive smoke-free policy.

Other notable highlights in the report were:

- Currently, 25 states, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Washington, DC have enacted comprehensive smoke-free workplace laws to include restaurants and bars. Seventeen of those states, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands include gaming facilities.
- Smoking causes six million deaths in America annually and is the leading cause of preventable death in our country.
- For every smoking related death, 30 others live with a serious smoking-related illness.
- In 2018, Louisiana ranked dead last (falling behind Mississippi for 50th) in the country with the greatest health challenges. A high percentage of smokers (23.1% of Louisiana adults vs. 14% nationally) was noted as a contributing factor.
- Louisiana’s cigarette excise tax ranks 37th lowest in the country, well below the national average.
- Secondhand smoke contaminates the air with more than 7000 chemicals, including hundreds that are toxic and approximately 70 recognized as carcinogens.
- Ventilation systems are not a solution. The US Surgeon General says “...cleaning the air, and ventilating buildings cannot eliminate exposures of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke.”
- Non-smokers exposed to secondhand smoke increase their risk of heart disease by 25-30%, lung cancer by 20-30%, and, stroke by 20-30%.
- In the United States, nearly 42,000 deaths occur among non-smokers as a result of secondhand smoke.

- A National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health study showed non-smoking casino workers had an increase in a cigarette carcinogen in the body in as little as an eight-hour work shift and recommends making ALL casinos smoke-free for the safety of their workers.
- Regarding e-Cigarettes, the US Surgeon General has determined that 'E-cigarette aerosol is not harmless' and that exposure to the product puts bystanders at risk for numerous harmful substances.
- Infants, small children, and elderly family members may be at greater risk than adults due to exposure to thirdhand smoke.
- A 2009 study indicates that 12% of Medicaid costs are attributable to smoking.
- Annual healthcare costs directly caused by smoking for all of Louisiana are \$1.89 billion, with \$803 million in Medicaid costs alone.
- Louisiana residents' share of the state and federal tax burden from smoking caused government expenditures is \$1,212 per person.
- A 2016 study by the University of Louisiana Lafayette showed a strong correlation between smoking addiction and problem gambling.
- Having a statewide comprehensive smoke-free law would be expected to result in 6,800 fewer adults smoking, 2,600 youth never starting to smoke, a reduction in death of 4,100 Louisiana citizens and 500 fewer deaths from non-smokers. In addition, there would be \$2.08 million in lung cancer treatment savings; \$6.72 million in savings in fewer heart attacks and strokes.

"This report is clear, concise and thorough. There is simply no justifiable reason for these special interests to be carved out of a law meant to protect everyone. The Committee heard testimony from the gaming industry regarding potential losses if a smoke-free law were in place and their numbers were insignificant when compared to the billions of dollars we must pay in direct and indirect health care costs," says Carter. "Frankly, it's disgusting that they even tried to justify profits over the lives of Louisiana citizens," she adds.

Committee members represented a broad and diverse group of government and private sector entities. The final vote in support of the findings in the study was 15-2 with the two members representing the gaming industry dissenting. As directed in the resolution, the report has been delivered to the House Health and Welfare Committee and will then be distributed to the entire Legislature.

"The science is irrefutable. Secondhand smoke kills. It harms physically and it harms financially." The question now, Carter asks is, "What is our Legislature going to do about it?"

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