

Young Lungs at Play: Tobacco-free Parks in Albany, New York

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At A Glance

When a family member dies from lung cancer, the dangers of smoking and breathing secondhand smoke become personal. In addition, after learning that children are exposed to the dangers of secondhand smoke (SHS) daily, a local neighborhood association president wanted to speak out. Thanks to his work and that of other community stakeholders, today more than 100,000 children and their families each year enjoy tobacco-free public playgrounds, athletic fields, and swimming pools in the City of Albany.

Public Health Challenge

According to New York State Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data, residents with low income and education levels are more likely to smoke than those with higher incomes and higher levels of education. In Albany County, New York, more than 16% of adults smoke and in the City of Albany, 15% of residents did not complete high school and 34% have an annual household income less than \$25,000. Lower-income families rely heavily on public playgrounds, swimming pools, and athletic fields to meet their children's physical activity needs. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), secondhand smoke (SHS) can increase ear infections, asthma attacks, and respiratory infections in children. In addition, the CDC notes that smoke-free policies are the only effective way to protect nonsmokers from SHS.

Approach

Decreasing exposure to secondhand smoke where children play is a priority in Albany. Building on statewide momentum for making public outdoor areas tobacco-free, the Albany County Strategic Alliance for Health and the Capital District Tobacco-free Coalition developed an outreach strategy to increase community awareness and educate local stakeholders about the risks associated with secondhand smoke exposure. The Coalition reached out to residents through health fairs, charity runs, community groups, neighborhood associations, parent-teacher associations (PTA), and schools to create awareness about secondhand smoke where children play.



Find Out More

Sharing facts about the risks of secondhand smoke takes time, persistence, and determination, but the reward of a healthier environment for children and the community can far outweigh any time invested. Consider any exposure children in your community may have to secondhand smoke. Taking the time to work with others to create awareness about the risks of secondhand smoke in your community is essential to making parks and other places where children engage in physical activity tobacco-free.

Results

As awareness grew in Albany, residents started asking for safe places where their children could be physically active without being exposed to tobacco smoke. One resident, whose sister was a life-long smoker that died of lung cancer at age 52, was particularly inspired to share his emotional story with local decision makers. In April of 2012, 35 City of Albany park playgrounds, swimming pools and athletic fields implemented tobacco-free protections, affecting nearly 100,000 residents and visitors each year. The Capital District Tobacco-free Coalition provided 48 signs to the City of Albany Parks and Recreation Department to install in the new tobacco-free areas.

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Children don't need secondhand smoke or cigarette butts on their playgrounds. Perhaps more importantly, they don't need exposure to a habit their young impressionable minds might latch on to as desirable behavior.

- Albany Neighborhood Association President

What's Next

The long-term goals are to reduce both the exposure to secondhand smoke and the social acceptability of tobacco use in Albany. While public places where children play are now tobacco-free, tobacco use is still permitted in other areas of the park as well as in multi-family housing units where children live. Similarly, employees and patients in health facilities and other workplaces continue to be exposed to secondhand smoke on their campuses. The Coalition will continue to use its successful outreach strategies to raise awareness among residents and decision makers about the dangers of secondhand smoke in these environments.