

Expanding Smokefree Communities

Community Profiles:

Southwest Virginia

Community Overview

The *Healthy Grounds for our Youth* coalition is using a multi-dimensional approach to address the problem of tobacco use in rural Southwest Virginia by educating its residents on the health benefits associated with tobacco-free school environments. The coalition is focusing their activities on the contiguous counties of Carroll, Henry, Patrick, Smyth, Tazewell and Wythe, as well as the independent cities of Galax and Martinsville.

Health Equity Focus

This project targets a rural area of southwest Virginia that has a long history with tobacco as its main source of income for its residents. Because of this historical tie to tobacco, these areas have some of the highest rates of tobacco use and tobacco-related diseases in the entire state.

Community Demographics

It is well-established that economics and education play a significant role in community smoking rates. Statewide, those with less education and lower household incomes have a higher smoking rate. In these targeted rural communities, the rate of those graduating from high school falls below the state average.¹ The targeted community has a significantly lower median household income which results in a higher percentage of children in poverty.² These inequities in Southwestern Virginia when combined with the rich tobacco history create a strong need for a combination of tobacco prevention and cessation programs, media campaigns, and tobacco-free schools to combat the use of tobacco products.

Burden of Tobacco Use in Rural Communities– The Challenge

Adult & Youth Smoking Rates

According to the American Lung Association’s latest disparities report, *“Cutting Tobacco’s Rural Roots: Tobacco Use in Rural Communities,”* residents of rural communities are more likely to use tobacco products, to start at a younger age, and be exposed to secondhand smoke at work and at home than their counterparts in cities and suburbs. These disparities perpetuate a culture of tobacco use that ultimately results in higher rates of tobacco-related illness and death among this population.³

The statewide smoking rate in Virginia for adults is 19%. The rate of smoking in these rural counties is higher across the board: Tazewell – 23%, Patrick – 25%, Smyth – 27%, Wythe – 30%, and Carroll County at 33%.⁴ In 2011, 15.8% of high school students in the U.S. were current smokers. In Virginia, high school smoking rates were slightly lower at 13%.⁵ In 2011, 18.1% of high school students in the U.S. were current smokers. In Virginia, high school smoking rates were slightly lower at 15.0%.⁶

Advancing Health Equity through Tobacco-Free Living – The Solution

In this rural, low-income, and underserved area of Southwestern Virginia, the Healthy Grounds for our Youth local leadership team is working together to educate school administrators and community members

about the components of comprehensive tobacco-free school environments. These combined efforts will impact all eight school districts in the targeted community and will help to establish new norms around tobacco use on school grounds. This type of environmental improvement has the potential to greatly reduce exposure to secondhand smoke and will help prepare youth in Southwest Virginia for the reality of tobacco-free workplaces. Moreover this initiative will serve as a model for school districts and communities across the Commonwealth who have yet to establish tobacco-free schools.

- American Lung Association
- Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth
- Virginia Tech and Research Investigator for VCU
- Emory and Henry College
- Virginia Department of Health
- Superintendent of Schools, Tazewell County
- Superintendent of Schools, Smyth County
- Director of Instruction, Wythe County Schools
- School Health Coordinator, Wythe County
- Physical Education Teacher, Carroll County Schools

If you would like to find out more or get involved with the educational efforts underway in Southwest Virginia, please contact Billie Murray, Project Manager, Tobacco Free Living at the American Lung Association in Virginia at billie.murray@lung.org.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts.

² Ibid

³ American Lung Association: Cutting Tobacco's Rural Roots.

⁴ University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. *County Health Rankings 2012*.

<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/#app/>

⁵ Virginia Youth Tobacco Survey <http://www.vfhy.org/statistics/tobacco/virginia-youth-tobacco-survey>

⁶ Smoking cessation: the economic benefits. Potential costs and benefits of smoking cessation for Indiana. American Lung Association. <http://www.lungusa.org/stop-smoking/tobacco-control-advocacy/reports-resources/cessation-economic-benefits/states/indiana.html>. Accessed July 7, 2011.