

Expanding Smokefree Communities

Community Profiles:

Southwest Virginia

Community Overview

The American Lung Association LungUSA territory (Virginia) in partnership with the school leadership teams and other key community partners have developed the Tobacco-Free Schools Project, a collaborative dedicated to promoting the importance and benefits of tobacco-free school environments in Southwest Virginia, particularly in schools located in Dickenson, Wise, Russell, Scott Counties and the small city of Norton.

Health Equity Focus

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

Community Demographics

For many years, southwest Virginia heavily depended on income from tobacco production and consumption and, currently, tobacco is the largest cash crop for farmers. Smoking in this community has simply become a part of the cultural norm, and many studies establish that economics and education largely correlate to community smoking rates. In these targeted rural communities the rate of those graduating from high school falls below the state average.¹ These targeted communities also have a lower median household income and, as a result, there is a high percentage of children living in poverty.² These disparities along with the region's rich tobacco history create a pertinent need for tobacco prevention and cessation programs, media campaigns, and tobacco-free schools to fight against the use of tobacco products.

Burden of Tobacco Use in Rural Communities – The Challenge

Adult & Youth Smoking Rates

According to the National Health Interview Survey, cigarette use among those in rural populations is higher than their urban counterparts.³ These factors promote a community of tobacco users, ultimately causing high rates of tobacco-related illnesses and death among this population.⁴

The statewide smoking rate in Virginia for adults is about 19.0 percent. The rate of smoking in these rural counties is higher across the board. According to the 2012 report from the Surgeon General, tobacco is a pediatric epidemic with almost one in four high school seniors being a current smoker, compared with one in three young adults and one in five adults.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 and underserved area of Southwestern Virginia, the American Lung Association LungUSA territory established the tobacco-free schools project and will partner with other organizations to educate community members and school administrators about the essential elements of tobacco-free school environments. This work will create a healthier atmosphere for all schools within the school districts in the targeted communities. Creating school environments that are tobacco-free has the ability to reduce exposure to secondhand smoke on school grounds, and will allow youth to envision a smokefree lifestyle as they mature. These partner organizations include:

- Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth
- Virginia Tech University
- Russell County Schools
- Dickenson County Schools
- Scott County Schools
- Norton City Schools
- Wise County Schools
- Russell County Schools
- Virginia Department of Health
- LENOWISCO Health District
- Frontier Health

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 USDHHS, CDC. 2006. Summary Health Statistics for US Adults: National Health Interview Survey. National Center for Health Statistics. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_235.pdf.

⁴ American Lung Association: Cutting Tobacco's Rural Roots.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2012.

⁶ CDC. 2011 Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance System.