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Make all public places smoke-free now

Last November, Nevadans voted to protect their health by passing Question 5 on the list of statewide initiatives and rejecting Question 4.

For the proponents of Question 5 (the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association and the American Lung Association, among many others), the result was a major victory in a long battle to protect Nevadans from secondhand smoke.

For more than 10 years, these groups had unsuccessfully tried to work with state lawmakers to enact meaningful legislation limiting secondhand-smoke exposure in such places as child-care centers and grocery stores. Advisory questions on the ballot in Clark and Washoe counties in 2002 showed that Nevadans overwhelmingly wanted protection from secondhand-smoke exposure, but the legislature failed to act. Faced once

again with legislative inaction, these organizations and other public health groups throughout Nevada banded together to put Question 5 on the ballot and take it to the public.

The passage of Question 5 bans smoking in all public places where children are allowed, effective Dec. 8, 2006. That includes all day-care centers, restaurants, grocery and retail

stores, shopping malls and movie theaters and in bar-restaurants that serve full meals (sports bars). It does not ban smoking in bars that do not sell food or on the gaming floors of casinos.

Question 4 — also advertised as limiting exposure to secondhand smoke — was supported by gaming, bar and tavern owners and

the tobacco industry. Had Question 4 won, it would have actually weakened Nevada's antismoking laws, allowing smoking in some day-care centers and anywhere a slot machine could be placed, including malls, retail stores, grocery and convenience stores. All restaurants would have been allowed to continue to have smoking sections. There also would have been no requirement to enclose these smoking areas from the non-smoking areas.

The passage of Question 4 would have allowed Nevada to remain the smoking capital of the nation and poster child of the tobacco industry. Fewer Nevadans (23.1 percent) smoke than previously, yet we remain well above the national average (20.9 percent). Nevada also currently has the smallest percentage of smoke-free worksites in the nation (48 percent). Nevada continues to rank as one of the unhealthiest states in which to reside, and that dubious ranking is partly attributable to the high exposure rates to secondhand smoke.

The Centers for Disease Control in 2004 issued a health advisory for secondhand smoke in which it stated that exposure to secondhand smoke results in a two-fold increase in the risk of heart attacks, and even a 30-minute exposure can cause substantial biological damage. The advisory recommended that people avoid all places that allow smoking. Even more recently, in 2006, the U.S. surgeon general issued a new report stating that there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke.

For those who would argue that ventilation systems are the answer, the American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air-Conditioning Engineers released a position paper on

Talk Back

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environmental tobacco smoke in August 2005 stating: "At present, the only way to effectively eliminate the health risk associated with indoor secondhand-smoke exposure is to ban smoking activity... [A]dverse health effects for the occupants of the smoking room cannot be controlled by ventilation."

The passage of Question 5 will go a long way in improving the health of Nevadans. What still remains a significant secondhand-smoke health concern for Nevada is on the gaming floors of casinos.

University of Nevada, Reno studies have shown that these workers are the most highly exposed workforce in the country. A recent University study also has dispelled the myth that most gamblers smoke, putting the rate at just slightly above the national average of 20.9 percent. In fact, most poker rooms are smoke-free because of customer demand.

Thus, a change in casino smoking policies would not only protect these workers and patrons but would be responsive to the majority of patrons.

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