



N.C. Smoke-Free/Tobacco-Free Government Buildings, Grounds and Parks

Iredell County Government Elects to Make the Healthy Choice Easier

Summary: Iredell County government buildings, grounds and parks became 100% smoke-free in January 2017, after a two-year process that was influenced by local health department regulation, a county wellness program and a desire to protect county property and reduce costs.

Challenge: In years past, the administration of Iredell County, NC considered adopting a smoke-free campus on a number of occasions. With so many elected officials at different levels weighing in, it was difficult to come to a consensus on moving forward. Then several things happened. First, the NC Local Health Department Accreditation process required a tobacco-free campus at the health department. “We realized that we had to do it for the health department locations – all three” said Iredell County Manager Ron Smith. Secondly, there was a new sheriff in town, literally - and the sheriff was concerned about the impact of smoking in county vehicles and supported a smoke-free policy to protect them. Last, and most important, the county adopted a wellness program to address the rising cost of health insurance. The program offers a financial bonus to employees who meet wellness goals. One of the wellness program disqualifiers was tobacco use. “It was irony,” Smith said. “We realized that we were asking our employees to stop using tobacco, but not providing an environment that made it easy to do so.” Additionally, the parks and recreation staff were receiving complaints from parents about smoking in the parks, and saw this as an opportunity for a healthier park environment and the cost-savings of reduced smoking litter clean-up.

Solution: When policy discussions began in earnest in 2015, the county first sought input from employees. “There was not a lot of push back,” Smith explained, “and the problems that we heard were not insurmountable.” Smith credits the Iredell County Health Department, Human Resources Department, and strong support from the Board of Commissioners for the initiative’s success. In October 2015, the county adopted a smoke-free policy that includes electronic cigarettes. It became effective in January 2016 in a two-step process that included a 50-foot smoke-free zone around buildings for one year, to allow people to become accustomed to the change, and then officially 100% smoke-free on January 1, 2017.

Quote

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Results: Today the campuses of all Iredell County government properties are smoke-free, with more stringent tobacco-free rules in place for three health department locations. The policies impact approximately 950 employees and more than 169,000 residents. “As for the success of the smoke-free policy, I have heard nothing but good,” said Smith. According to Wellness Coordinator Sarah Williams, the Iredell County Wellness Program continues to provide smoke-free living education and smoking cessation programs to any full-time employees who want to quit. “We also promote access to QuitlineNC (<http://www.quitlinenc.com/>) as additional help for those who want to quit using tobacco products,” Williams said. Iredell’s insurance now provides free nicotine replacement therapy and other cessation medications with a doctor’s prescription.

Lessons Learned: Creating a healthy environment by making the healthy choice the easy choice sends a strong message from an employer showing they value their employees’ health. Taking the time needed to seek employee input and support when implementing a new policy is crucial to success. Following a phase-in process can allow adequate time for education, quit support and adjustment to change.

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