



N.C. Smoke-Free/Tobacco-Free Parks A Partnership between Public Health, Parks and Hospital System Results in Policy Compliance Success

Summary: In 2015, Mecklenburg County, N.C. (Charlotte) adopted a Tobacco-Free (TF) Parks Ordinance for county-owned parks and greenways. A primary urban greenway, Little Sugar Creek, runs adjacent to Carolinas Healthcare System's main hospital, which also has a tobacco-free property policy (since 2006). Historically, the greenway served as the informal "smoking area" for hospital visitors and some staff, creating a conflict with the new parks policy. Through intentional partner communication and development of a shared vision, this conflict was addressed and resolved, resulting in immediate improvement in policy compliance.

Challenge: Adoption of a tobacco-free parks policy was a big win for evidence-based tobacco control in Mecklenburg County, N.C. However, policy adoption alone does not ensure successful policy compliance. The physical location of the greenway adjacent to hospital property, with a sloped walkway hidden from view, created the perfect "secret place" for people to go smoke. For years, hospital staff and security even encouraged smokers to go to the greenway – out of immediate view and off hospital property. The norm was that people using the greenway to walk, run or bike by the hospital often had to endure significant secondhand smoke exposure. With adoption of the TF parks ordinance, this norm should have changed, but did not. Signage alone did not stop the "smoking area." Public Health continued to receive and document complaints via emails, calls and social media posts about smokers on the tobacco-free greenway. A local health advocate contacted hospital security and was told the greenway was not under their jurisdiction, and they had no authority to stop people from smoking there. Parks could not afford to place a full-time ranger on site. Although a meeting had taken place initially between partners, there lacked a shared vision for enforcement. The non-compliance in this unique location was threatening the integrity of the overall ordinance.

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To learn more about smoke-free policies in N.C., visit www.tobaccopreventionandcontrol.ncdhhs.gov

Quote

Feedback from a smoke-free policy advocate within one month after the changes: "I've seen a huge improvement with the smoking on the greenway by the hospital . . . Yesterday was a very busy day on the greenway - lots of folks and families out walking, running, and biking. I know that I was not the only one who enjoyed being able to use the greenway on such a beautiful day without having to travel through a crowd of people smoking by the hospital." Paula Pridgen

Solution: Mecklenburg County Public Health (MCPH) staff, along with youth from Youth Empowered Solutions (YES) conducted observational scans at the greenway for over two months. They made notes, took photos of evidence of tobacco use/tobacco litter, and had non-confrontational conversations with smokers. Next, the Tobacco Control Coordinator (MCPH) facilitated a meeting of decision-makers and stakeholders to discuss potential solutions to tackle the problem. Hospital leadership, hospital security and hospital operations staff attended the meeting, along with leadership from Parks and Recreation and MCPH.

Results: After viewing the evidence and discussing the issue the group agreed to a resolution: 1) Increase hospital staff communication with clear expectation of no tobacco use on the greenway (for staff) and no referring visitors to the greenway to smoke; 2) Add signage to the greenway entrance; 3) Change hospital security officer protocol. Previously officers told smokers the hospital property was tobacco-free and they had to go off-property. The new script adds that the greenway is also tobacco-free. In addition, key operational staff from parks and hospital security agreed to touch base at least quarterly to stay informed on progress or issues.

Lessons Learned: Bringing the right partners to the table for honest discussion and problem solving is paramount. This included the recognition that all are partners in promoting health and must have the same vision to promote tobacco-free public spaces. Heavy handed enforcement was not necessary for positive change.



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