

NALBOH NEWSBRIEF

A Publication of the National Association of Local Boards of Health

You Spoke. We Listened. Strategic Planning Process Moves NALBOH in New Direction

Public Health and
Continuous Quality
Improvement

A Look Back at
Tobacco Control

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Looking Back from the Future: A Perspective on Tobacco – 2011

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Fifty years from now, the solutions to what is often being called the “Great Recession” may seem obvious. Those of us still around will talk about living through this financial downturn and describe to younger generations the options we had, challenges we faced, and opportunities we took or wished we’d taken. And though historians will try to put it all in perspective for us, their views will vary, and in the end, they’ll agree to disagree, and simply conclude that it was a difficult time for all, but that our country pulled through, as it always does. What will not be in doubt, however, is that the crisis we faced required a shared commitment of purpose and actions that were bold and at times controversial.

It is tempting to speculate on how historians, decades from now, will view the way the United States addressed another crisis today—the tobacco epidemic. Each year, at least 443,000 people in the United States die as a result of smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke, while 8.6 million suffer from smoking-caused illnesses. And, as with all epidemics, tobacco has had a significant impact on our nation’s economy. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the years between 2000 and 2004, cigarette smoking was responsible for approximately \$193 billion in annual health-related economic losses in the U.S. (\$96 billion in direct medical costs and approximately \$97 billion in lost productivity). The annual healthcare expenditures related to secondhand smoke exposure alone are estimated to be \$4.98 billion.

Future historians seeking evidence to support the stunning economic toll of tobacco use in this decade will have plenty of source material. At the end of last year, for example, the U.S. Surgeon General released a weighty report detailing new scientific findings on the health consequences of tobacco use and exposure. The report confirms that even slight exposure to tobacco smoke, including occasional smoking and secondhand smoke, causes immediate harm that can lead to serious illness or death. This is the 30th (yes, 30th!) Surgeon General’s Report warning of the dangers of tobacco use. The cumulative research in this report (*How Tobacco Smoke Causes Disease: The Biology and Behavioral Basis for Smoking Attributable*

Disease, at www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/tobaccosmoke/index.html) proves the extent to which both tobacco smoke damages every organ in the body, and directly contributes to chronic disease.

Surely, historians in the second half of this century will debate why, despite the formidable body of scientific evidence available about the hazards of tobacco, so many people in the U.S. continued to underestimate the severity and magnitude of the health risks of this product. In 2010, for example, at least one in five U.S. high school students and adults still smoked. Kids alone consumed approximately 800 million packs of cigarettes a year. Fifty years from now, it will be hard to believe that approximately 443,000 people in the United States died annually as a result of smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke—a staggering number of lives lost, dreams crushed, families destroyed.

On a brighter note, historians may well see this decade as a milestone in tobacco control, noting as a key achievement the 2009 Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, which gave the Food and Drug Administration regulatory authority over tobacco. They will flag 2009 as the year the U.S. banned the sale, distribution, and manufacturing of cigarettes containing flavors other than tobacco or menthol. And historians will hail 2011 as the year the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced its plan to require that all cigarette packages and advertisements include new, larger, and more prominent textual health warnings and color graphics that drive home the point that smoking is a grave health hazard. They’ll describe how in 2010 and early 2011, the public was asked to comment on 36 different proposed images that depicted some of the severe health consequences of tobacco use. These included powerful and disturbing visuals of sick and dying victims of tobacco smoke, along with text messages like “Smoking can kill you” or “Cigarettes cause strokes and heart disease.” Historians may well point out that the graphic warning mandate was not groundbreaking, since by 2010 more than 30 countries required far stronger graphic warnings on cigarette packs than the U.S., but they will still note that this federal law, implemented in 2012, was a turning point in tobacco marketing.

Finally, historians will record how, spurred by the Obama administration’s focus on tobacco control and prevention, and initiatives such as the Communities Putting Prevention to Work program, state and local governments and local boards of health at this time were committed to implementing effective tobacco control measures to regulate the sale and use of tobacco products—measures based on proven, evidence-based policies, such as smoke-free legislation and tobacco product pricing, advertising, and promotion regulations.

As we enter 2011, an unprecedented number of federal, state, and local policymakers, including many boards of health, have united with public health advocates, legal professionals, and the medical community to address the tobacco crisis in this country. Looking back at this period, historians may well see it as a new chapter in tobacco control and an unparalleled opportunity to begin to close the book on this toxic product. We have more than 400,000 reasons to prove them right.

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the board of health level, please contact the NALBOH office for more information.

NALBOH staff also attended an ASTHO-NACCHO Community Guide Partner Meeting in Washington, D.C. in December. Several potential partnering opportunities with other national organizations were identified to promote and provide technical assistance for the Community Guide at the state, local, tribal, and territorial governing levels.

In order to reach boards of health across the country, NALBOH will host and archive four Community Guide webinars. Each of the upcoming webinars will be directed to different statutory authorities (advising, governing, policymaking, and tribal) and will focus on the importance of using evidence-based approaches, such as those found in the Community Guide. To sign up or learn more about these and other webinars provided by NALBOH, please visit www.nalboh.org/Events.htm.