

# Policy Protects People: Tobacco Advocacy in Gaston County

## HEALTHY COMMUNITIES STRATEGY

Increase the number of evidence-based 100% smoke-free or tobacco-free regulations including e-cigarettes covering government buildings and grounds, parks and recreation and/or enclosed public places through ordinances or Board of Health rules.

### Public Health Problem/Issue

More than 16 million Americans are living with a disease caused by smoking. For every person who dies because of smoking, at least 30 people live with a serious smoking-related illness. Smoking causes cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung diseases, diabetes, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Secondhand smoke exposure contributes to approximately 41,000 deaths among nonsmoking adults and 400 deaths in infants each year. Secondhand smoke causes stroke, lung cancer, and coronary heart disease in adults. Children who are exposed to secondhand smoke are at increased risk for sudden infant death syndrome, acute respiratory infections, middle ear disease, more severe asthma, respiratory symptoms, and slowed lung growth<sup>1</sup>.

Research has documented the effectiveness of laws and policies in a comprehensive tobacco control effort to protect the public from secondhand smoke exposure, promote cessation, and prevent initiation, including: increasing the unit price of tobacco products; implementing comprehensive smoke-free laws that prohibit smoking in all indoor areas of worksites, restaurants, and bars, and encouraging smoke-free private settings such as multi-unit housing; providing insurance coverage of evidence-based tobacco cessation treatments; and limiting minors' access to tobacco products<sup>2</sup>.

Health equity can be achieved in tobacco prevention and control by eliminating differences in tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke between certain groups. Well-enforced and comprehensive tobacco control policies (i.e., those that do not include exceptions or unclear language that may leave some population groups unprotected) can reduce these disparities. Unlike traditional direct-service interventions that focus on individual behaviors, tobacco control policies focus on large-scale, population-level changes. Tobacco control policies have the potential to influence and change social norms related to tobacco initiation, use, and secondhand smoke exposure<sup>3</sup>.

According to the County Health Rankings and Roadmaps,<sup>4</sup> in 2016 Gaston County adults smoked at a higher rate (21%) than the state (10%) as a whole. At the same time, new products like e-cigarettes and vapes had emerged on the market, threatening to undo the progress that had been made in the past decades to lower tobacco use nationally, particularly among youth. At that time many of Gaston County's 12 municipalities didn't have official smoke-free policies or adequate signage for buildings, grounds and parks/recreation areas.

In 2017, the Youth Behavior Risk Survey showed that 49% of Gaston County high school students had ever used "electronic vapor products", and 27% were currently using them. For youth's developing brains, no

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/basic\\_information/health\\_effects/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/basic_information/health_effects/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/best\\_practices/pdfs/2014/introduction.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/best_practices/pdfs/2014/introduction.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Best Practices for Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs—2014. Atlanta, GA: US Dept 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; 2014.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/north-carolina/2016/rankings/gaston/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot>

amount of exposure to nicotine is safe. Youth use of tobacco products can cause memory, learning and attention problems, and prime their brains for future substance use disorders<sup>5</sup>. Tobacco-free policies are an evidence-based intervention for: primary prevention of tobacco use among youth and adults, reducing exposure to secondhand smoke and e-cigarette aerosol, and providing supportive and encouraging environments for cessation.

## Taking Action/Intervention

In 2016, the Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services (GCDHHS), after conducting an inventory of existing policies across government property in Gaston, decided to advocate for tobacco-free policies where there weren't any, and expansion of existing smoke-free policies to include other types of tobacco. GCDHHS internal tobacco team included the Health Director, Community Health Education Administrator, Public Information Officer, Health Education Supervisor, and a Community Health Educator. This team decided to start small and build momentum by first partnering with a small municipality, Bessemer City. The City Manager, James Inman, emerged as a strong advocate who was ready to take action on this issue. In August of 2016, [Bessemer City](#) passed a local [ordinance](#) that was the most comprehensive in the state. This ordinance prohibited the use of tobacco on or in city buildings, grounds, parks, recreation areas, and inside indoor public places (any enclosed area to which the public is permitted or invited to enter). With the momentum of this first "win," a community coalition called Tobacco Free Gaston was formed, which consisted of three workgroups: Policy Support, Youth Education and Media Design.



Winning a Region 4 Health Alliance Award  
Hydiea Hayes, City Clerk of Bessemer City; Cheryl Loggins, Gaston County DHHS Board Member; Kim Elmore, Cancer Services of Gaston County; Alvssa Mouton, Gaston DHHS

## Results

After the Bessemer City ordinance, a second small municipality, Cherryville, enacted a duplicate ordinance in October 2017. Elected officials from these two municipalities assisted in spreading the word about the importance of addressing tobacco policy across the county. At the same time, the Media Design Workgroup was partnering with the Youth Advisory Council of Cancer Services of Gaston County. This partnership educated a group of 30 high school youth from across the county and engaged them in a photo-voice project<sup>6</sup>. The students took photos representing how tobacco impacted them and presented their project to the Gaston County DHHS Board, which functions as the Gaston County Board of Health. In August 2018, the students educated the Board on the issue of youth vaping from their perspective using the photos they had taken. Subsequently, they were invited to present to the



Board of County Commissioners in September 2018. Those presentations, supported by the success in Cherryville and Bessemer City, sparked conversations about taking action. As a result, in April 2019, the Gaston County DHHS Board adopted a [100% tobacco free rule](#) for all government property and indoor public places. The Gaston County Board of Commissioners approved the rule in May 2019.

<sup>5</sup><https://e-cigarettes.surgeongeneral.gov/documents/surgeon-generals-advisory-on-e-cigarette-use-among-youth-2018.pdf>

<sup>6</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photovoice>

Tobacco Free Gaston offers the following advice for others seeking tobacco ordinances and policies:

- Policy approaches to public health challenges take patience- it was a marathon, not a sprint, for Gaston County.
- Start small and build momentum towards a larger goal, and take time to celebrate the small victories along the way.
- It is important to build relationships with community partners interested in working on the issue, and to empower community champions. It was critical for local leaders of Bessemer City and Cherryville to serve as credible spokespeople to their peers about why and how they implemented their ordinances.
- Integrating youth voices and perspective can be powerful for encouraging decision-makers to pay attention to an issue.
- Get comfortable engaging with the media - Invite them to events, send press releases celebrating wins, and offer to be a “local expert” on the topic as news cycles change and your particular health issue comes back up “on the agenda.”
- Most importantly, the work does not stop once a policy has passed. Our 100% tobacco-free rule is only as good as its implementation, including outreach to those in the community who will be most affected to provide resources for compliance. Make sure to provide cessation resources in every presentation and on all written/printed material.

