

Support a Smoke-Free New York

Tobacco kills. It kills more New Yorkers each year than drugs, AIDS, homicide, and suicide combined. Besides the 7,500 deaths caused by tobacco annually, there are the thousands more New Yorkers who suffer from smoking-related strokes, heart attacks, lung disease, and cancers.

Yet you need not be a smoker to be effected by tobacco. Even with years of smoking bans in office buildings, restaurants, and stores, more than half of non-smoking New Yorkers have elevated levels of toxic residues in their bodies caused by secondhand smoke. A person near an outdoor smoker could inhale many times more toxic material than found in normal levels of air pollution. Even brief exposure to secondhand smoke can lead to more frequent asthma attacks in asthmatic children.

A Ban on Smoking

Legislation has been introduced in the City Council that would outlaw smoking in city parks, pedestrian plazas, and on city beaches. Why am I writing about a ban on smoking? Because it is an issue of great importance, effecting the health and well-being of communities of color, especially low-income communities.

Extending the smoking ban to parks and beaches might sound to some as an attempt by government to constrict our personal liberties. If adults want to smoke, the argument goes, then government should not be in the business of telling them that they can't. But this is not an issue about individual liberties. If people want to smoke, there are places – their homes, their cars, city streets – where they can. It is an issue of health, and of the protection of our environment.

A city survey of parks, playgrounds, and beaches conducted last summer found that 75 percent of the litter on New York City beaches was cigarette butts. Cigarette butts are toxic and slow to decompose. They threaten people's health and the environment.

The legislation to outlaw smoking in parks and on beaches may seem like a good idea, but will it be enforced? Other smoking bans, in fact, have been successfully administered, many by community enforcement. Try lighting up in a restaurant or in a public building and watch non-smoking enforcement go into action, whether by someone official or a bystander. The Parks Department's Enforcement Patrol can enforce a smoking ban on city beaches and in parks. Smoking is already banned in the city's playgrounds.

New York City would hardly be the first place to outlaw smoking in parks or on beaches. Los Angeles, Chicago, and Seattle have laws that make their parks and beaches smoke-free. In New York State, 10 counties have bans on smoking at beaches and 34 counties ban smoking in parks.

Health Concerns

Smoking is a serious health problem. There is a widening gap in life expectancy between richer and poorer Americans. One reason is that smoking has declined more rapidly among people with higher incomes. In New York City, the number of people hospitalized for cancer, heart disease, and diabetes in low-income neighborhoods is much higher than in other neighborhoods.

Hospitalization rates for heart disease in eight low-income neighborhoods are twice the citywide rate.

About one in five low-income adults smoke, a population estimated to be about 390,000 people. Secondhand smoke exacerbates the condition of asthma. We know from a great deal of research that asthma often afflicts children of low-income families. Hospitalization rates for asthma in East Harlem are five times higher than the rates for the Upper East Side.

The legislation (Intro 0332-2010) to prohibit smoking in parks, pedestrian plazas, and on beaches has the support of Mayor Bloomberg and Council President Christine Quinn as well as a dozen Council members. The bill also is supported by the NYC Coalition for a Smoke-Free City. The Coalition is composed of 24 organizations in the city – including the Community Service Society - trained to conduct community education outreach and counseling for those who face barriers to accessing health care and resources to quit smoking.

A 2009 survey showed that 65 percent of city residents support a ban on smoking at outdoor recreational places. This can work. And it can help alleviate some of the health problems that afflict low-income New Yorkers.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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