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Grant will help form Tobacco-Free Lee coalition

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Nearly 20 percent of adults in Lee County smoke, more young people here light up than the state average and 14 percent of pregnant women screened for special prenatal services reported smoking during pregnancy — a rate that alarms public health providers.

But a new, three-year, \$600,000 state grant may help bring down those statistics.

The Lee County Health Department this week will launch a new coalition, Tobacco-Free Lee, which will bring together student and adult community, business and faith leaders to knock down tobacco-use rates. The department is hosting the first organizational meeting and training Thursday.

“We truly want to lower the numbers of youth who are starting smoking, and the women’s issues are certainly of concern,” said Brendan Donohue, the department’s tobacco program specialist.

In Lee County, more women than men smoke — 22.6 percent vs. 16.4 percent. Among children, 5.7 percent of Lee County middle-schoolers reported smoking within 30 days of taking a behavioral risk survey and 18.4 percent of high-schoolers reported doing so. The statewide average rates were 5 percent and 14.5 percent, respectively.

Among the group’s goals will be to reach out to women, particularly pregnant ones, and make sure they know about resources to help them quit. The group will likely look into enacting litter laws to curtail the cigarette butts collecting on county streets and beaches.

Donohue said the group may also push to make all county buildings tobacco-free; Lee Memorial Health System, he noted, will prohibit smoking in all its facilities beginning this November. Exact plans and strategies will come out of coalition meetings.

Jean Campbell, the safe and drug free schools coordinator for the Lee County School District, said the community coalition and grant money will help further the work her department is doing in middle and high schools.

There, students are working to drive down substance abuse rates through marketing campaigns that show it’s the minority of students who experiment with drugs and alcohol, contrary to what students believe. Campbell said students intend to push into tobacco-free messages this fall. Having a community coalition will help, she said.

“It’s nice to have agencies working together. With all the funding cuts that have been taking place, I think it’s going to take all of us uniting our efforts to make a difference so that we don’t see serious cuts in our prevention activities,” Campbell said.
