

'Tobacco Free Lee' coalition aims to curb smoking

Lee health department joins state effort

By MCKENZIE CASSIDY, mcassidy@breezenewspapers.com

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The Lee County Health Department is joining a statewide initiative to cut tobacco usage by forming a new coalition called "Tobacco Free Lee."

The first Tobacco Free Lee meeting was held Wednesday morning at the new Lee County Health Department facility on Pondella Road after the state awarded the local agency a \$600,000 grant.

Its purpose is to bring together students, parents, officials from the business community and faith leaders to cut tobacco usage countywide.

"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, tobacco program specialist for the health department. "We can develop programs targeted to the most vulnerable in our population, youth and pregnant women."

A \$1 tobacco user fee was instituted by the Florida Legislature during its 2009 spring session and the tax became effective July 1.

Besides generating an estimated \$950 million in one year, legislators hope the tax will deter teenagers from picking up a cigarette.

According to statistics compiled by the Lee County Health Department, 20 percent of adults in Lee County smoke tobacco.

Local youth are more likely to light up than the state average, reported the health department, and 14 percent of women screened for prenatal services said they have smoked during their pregnancy.

Nearly 20 percent of high school students in Lee County admitted to smoking in the last 30 days in a survey from the health department, while statewide 14.5 percent of students in high school say they smoke.

Donohue said the main priorities are to make all county buildings, businesses and universities smoke free within the next year.

Lee Memorial Health System is one county agency that has implemented a program to be smoke free by Nov. 19, and the coalition hopes others follow.

While it is working to decrease the number of smokers in Lee County, officials from the American Lung Association stress that any smoker attempting to quit needs to be part of a cessation program to be successful.

Typical smokers try to quit six to nine times before finally kicking the habit, according to Brenda Olsen, chief operating officer of the Southeast ALA.

While 70 percent of the population has a desire to quit, only 7 percent of those people will quit on their own.

Kurt Goerke, Lee County spokesperson for the ALA, said people can choose to quit on their own, but the best way is through a cessation program with behavior modification and nicotine replacement therapy.

The ALA has a program called "Freedom from Smoking" that includes group sessions and support.

"One of the nice things about our course is the first couple of weeks they aren't asked to quit," said Goerke. "At the first couple of sessions we look at what caused them to smoke."

The "Pack Track" is an example of an activity in the ALA program. Smokers who light up will write down how much they wanted that cigarette - on a scale of 1 to 10 - and draw a smiley, sad or bored face depending on how that cigarette made them feel.

According to Goerke, most of the participants find out they do not enjoy a majority of cigarettes, instead they smoke out of habit.

Freedom From Smoking has also been made available online.

"When it first came out I didn't think it would be successful because it lacked the face-to-face accountability," he said. "But, you can go on at 2 a.m. if you are having a tough time and they can post questions"

Although the online version of the program lacks physical interaction, it does provide smokers with 24-hour assistance and a national network of other quitters.

Goerke stressed that every person is different and while some can quit cold turkey, others need support and will have to try more than once to succeed.

Information on the ALA programs are available by calling 908-2680.

The Florida Quitline for Life, contacted at (877) U-CAN-NOW (822-6669), also provides free counseling sessions for anyone willing to quit in 30 days. Smokers with an annual salary lower than \$45,000 may be eligible to receive free nicotine replacement therapies.