

Local health facilities going tobacco free today

'09 Great American Smoke Out

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The 2009 Great American Smoke Out kicks off today with Lee County health facilities and residents deciding to go tobacco free.

The Great American Smoke Out, set aside as a day to help smokers quit, has been held every year for the past 34 years.

According to tobacco coalitions, 1,082 hospitals and health systems in the United States will ban tobacco.

All of the hospitals and medical offices of the Lee Memorial Health System are going smoke free, as well as other companies such as the Family Health Centers of Southwest Florida.

The LMHS Board of Directors originally voted to make the system smoke free in March.

Terri Starling, a spokesperson from Family Health Centers of Southwest Florida, said the facility wants patients and employees to reap the health benefits of being tobacco free. The organization will ban tobacco in 12 medical and six dental offices.

"In being a health care organization, we see the health benefits," she said. "They appreciate being able to walk in the building free from that."

Patients have been notified of the changes to policy as they walk through the door, Starling said, and so far the response has been positive.

"We realize it will be a challenge for a few folks," she said. "So far the response has been positive."

The Lee County Health Department is assisting organizations in the transition to become smoke free by offering tobacco cessation counselors and free access to nicotine replacement.

"This year, numerous community partners have joined together as the Tobacco-Free Lee Coalition to raise awareness and provide assistance to residents wanting to kick the habit," said Brendan Donohue, tobacco specialist for the Lee County Health Department, in a prepared statement. "The purpose of the Great American Smoke Out is to challenge people to 'Be Free' from all tobacco products for at least 24 hours."

Cessation counselors and information about nicotine replacement is available by calling the United Way's 211 or 433-3900.

Students Working Against Tobacco and the Florida COPD Foundation are offering free spirometer screenings, a test that determines lung capacity, from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. today at the Edison Mall in Fort Myers.

As the tobacco-free initiatives take hold in Lee, Students Working Against Tobacco unveiled a new logo. SWAT is an organization that educates children on the health risks related to using tobacco, as well as debunking myths about tobacco and ending the glamorizing of tobacco products.

"With the launch of the new logo and Web site, as well as inducting new board members, SWAT is well on its way to being in the spotlight of tobacco prevention again," said Kahreem Golden, chair of the Youth Advisory Board, in a prepared statement.

The new green logo features four adolescents holding up the SWAT letters. It will be used in the new Web site that will launch next year.