

## Vaping Prevention and Control Efforts in Rural America: Current Local Health Department Successes and Challenges



By Alyssa Mouton, Gaston County  
Department of Health and Human Services

### Background

Our health department is within a consolidated agency—the Gaston County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). We serve the 222,846 people of Gaston County. Gaston County is located in the south – central piedmont of North Carolina. Approximately 67% of the population lived in the municipalities and 33% lived in unincorporated areas outside these municipalities in 2017. The 2017 population estimates showed 78.7% of the population were White, 17.1% were Black or African American, 1.6% were Asian, and less than one percent American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander.



Smoking/tobacco use is a preventable risk factor for each of the top four leading causes of death in both our 2015 and 2018 Community Health Assessments: heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory disease and stroke. In response, DHHS initiated a project to bring comprehensive, tobacco-free government property and indoor public places policy to our county. We spent four years identifying local champions, coalition-building, engaging with local media, engaging with youth, and educating our local leaders on the issue, which resulted in the Gaston County (DHHS Board) Tobacco Rule. This rule is currently the most comprehensive county wide tobacco policy in the state of North Carolina.

### Overview

In 2016, when we began working on this issue, Gaston County adults smoked at a higher rate than the state as a whole. At the same time, new products like e-cigarettes and vaping 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. Many of our 12 municipalities still didn't have official smoke-free policies or adequate signage for buildings, grounds and parks/recreation areas.

Data also began to emerge from self-reported youth surveys showing that our youth were picking up e-cigarette and vaping products at or above the national rate. In 2017, the Youth Behavior Risk Survey showed that 49% of Gaston County high school students reported ever having used “electronic vapor products”, and 27% currently used them. For youth's developing brains, no 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. 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.

## Solution

After an inventory of Gaston County's smoke-free municipal and county government property regulations, we decided to work to create tobacco-free policies on government property where there weren't any, and to expand existing smoke-free policies to include other types of tobacco. The DHHS internal tobacco team included our: Health Director, Community Health Education Administrator, Public Information Officer, Health Education Supervisor, and a Community Health Educator. We decided to start small and build momentum within the county, so we began by partnering with a small municipality, The City of 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. It 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," we launched a community coalition called Tobacco Free Gaston, which generated the Policy Support, Youth Education and Media Design Workgroups.

## Results

After the Bessemer City ordinance, a second small municipality, Cherryville, enacted a duplicate ordinance in October 2017. The local elected officials from these municipalities assisted in spreading the word about the importance of addressing tobacco policy in our county. At the same time, the Media Design Workgroup was partnering with the Youth Advisory Council of Cancer Services of Gaston County. We educated the group of 30 high schoolers from across the county and engaged them in a photo-voice project. The students took photos representing how tobacco impacted them and asked to present their project to the Gaston County DHHS Board, which functions as our Board of Health. The students educated the Board on the issue of youth vaping from their perspective, using the photos they took, in August 2018. Subsequently, they were invited to present to our Board of County Commissioners in September 2018. Those presentations, supported by two local municipalities' success in enacting tobacco ordinances, sparked conversations about taking action. As a result, in April 2019, our Gaston County DHHS Board created and passed a 100% tobacco free rule for all government property and indoor public places. Our county commissioners approved it in May 2019.

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## Lessons Learned

Policy approaches to public health challenges take patience- it was a marathon, not a sprint, for us. You can 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 the city managers of Bessemer City and Cherryville to serve as credible spokespeople to their peers about why and how to implement local tobacco-free ordinances. Integrating youth voices and perspective can also be powerful for encouraging decision-makers to pay attention to an issue. We also recommend getting comfortable engaging with the media. Invite them to events, send press releases celebrating wins, and offer to be “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 most affected with support for compliance. Make sure to provide cessation resources in every presentation and on every written/printed material.

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## Vaping Prevention and Control Efforts in Rural America: Current Local Health Department Successes and Challenges



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### Background

Florence County Health Department is located in Northeastern Wisconsin and has staff that consists of a Health Officer/Director/Public Health Nurse, a Public Health Nurse/Registered Sanitarian, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator/Community Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian, an Administrative Assistant and one part-time Registered Dietitian that works remotely. The health department serves an area of 488 square miles and has a population of approximately 4,400 according to the 2017 US Census.

At present, the health department has collaboratively partnered with the local school district to change policy to a model tobacco free school policy that minimizes punitive outcomes (i.e. suspension and/or citations) for students found in possession of tobacco or tobacco products. Similarly, the health department conducts In-Depth training for those students in violation of the new tobacco free school policy. Furthermore, health department staff conduct Healthy Futures educational sessions in the health classes at the local school district.

In addition, the health department conducts outreach through social media and press promoting the Wisconsin Quitline for both adults and youth. We have seen an increase in cessation numbers for Florence County residents since the initiation of this strategy. Finally, the health department collaborates with community partners and stakeholders through coalition meetings, e-mails, and presentations to make a collective impact to decrease youth tobacco use.



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### Overview

Florence County has a sizeable low-to-moderately low income (less than 200% FPL) population which is prone to poorer health outcomes (Florence County CHA, 2020). Florence County also has a significantly higher aging and disabled population than other counties in the state of Wisconsin. This leaves the communities youth very few options in the way of creative and physical outlets for socialization and recreation. Thus, increasing adolescents risk taking behaviors (Florence County YRBS, 2019). In addition, our geographical and rural location increase our health disparities due to lack of access to care, lack of transportation, and food security issues.



Over the past few years, Florence County has seen a significant increase in the use of tobacco and tobaccoless products (i.e. vaping products) by youth. The increase in number of students receiving reprimands for using tobacco and tobaccoless products initiated the review of the schools current smoke free campus policy. The health department, along with human services, the sheriff's office, school district administration, and school board, collaboratively reviewed the current data, school policy, and policy template from Public Health Law Center for policy recommendations to curb the current vaping epidemic at the Florence School District. This discussion allowed for ample discussion among partners and stakeholders with the opportunity to strengthen existing partnerships.

by the local health department on a referral basis. This activity will be conducted at the school either before or after school hours to decrease the interruption of instructional time received.

In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding was entered into and signed by the school district and local substance abuse counselor to assist with the screening portion (second tier) of the updated policy. Letters of support were also submitted by the Florence County Sheriff's Office and Human Services Department to decrease offenses and referral load of violators while increasing the students potential for addiction

## Outcomes

The outcomes of the change in policy and the INDEPTH program are limited at this time due to the initiative only being in the initial stages of implementation. The school policy was updated and adopted in December of 2019. Since the adoption of the new model tobacco free school policy, the health department has received two referrals for the INDEPTH program.

The first student that participated in the INDEPTH Program, reported that they learned a lot of the negative health effects that vaping had on the body. They also felt the activity on the cost of a vaping addiction was insightful as well. The most positive outcome, was that they decided that they wanted to pursue a much more active lifestyle and possibly join the military in the future and vaping was not going to get them to the place they wanted to be.

The second student had some reservations about participating in the program due to work schedule and disagreement of why he was there. The student, ultimately, agreed to meet with the health department to participate in the INDEPTH Program. They were able to attend only one session prior to the school closing for COVID-19. The health department will follow-up with the student after the executive order to shelter in place and apply social distancing has been lifted. However, technology may also be an option moving forward.

## Solution

The solution reached by Florence County was multifaceted. First, the previously existing tobacco free campus policy was reviewed and ultimately replaced by the model tobacco free school policy drafted by the Public Health Law Center. This policy was tweaked by school administration to incorporate existing guidance from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and requests of the school board. This policy includes a tier system for consequences received. As part of the new policy the American Lung Associations, INDEPTH Program would be implemented for the first offense. This program will be conducted





## Lessons Learned

The most important lesson learned from this experience is to keep communication open with partners to create buy-in to recommended changes in policy and/or programming. It is also important to understand what your partners concerns are (i.e. staff time, funding, process, etc) in order to address those issues along the way. I also believe in making it as easy as possible for your partners. This way they know that you are willing to be a working part of the solution and that your suggestions are not just putting more work on their plate. Finally, keep the ultimate goal in view...helping today's youth understand the dangers of vaping and addiction.

The INDEPTH Program is an easy evidence-based program to use and it offers all the necessary tools

to address the various negative impacts of vaping, tobacco, and tobaccoless product use. This program, along with the model tobacco free school policy by the Public Health Law Center are all available for local use and are free. Therefore, they can be easily replicated in a variety of settings.

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