

Let's end casinos' smoking exemption

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Sunday, September 1, 2013

Later this fall, public health advocates will celebrate the seventh anniversary of the passage of the Nevada Clean Indoor Air Act. Approved by a solid majority of voters in 2006, the act remains one of the most popular and influential public health measures in Nevada history.

The act currently prohibits smoking in any form in most indoor places of employment, including restaurants and most bars and taverns that serve food, as well as a wide range of retail establishments and all government buildings and public places. There are, however, noteworthy exemptions to the act. In particular, the gaming industry's nicotine-stained fingerprints remain on the act's provisions permitting smoking in gaming areas of casinos.

Consequently, most of the 170,000 Nevadans currently employed by casinos continue to be exposed to second-hand smoke simply by showing up to work each day. As there is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke, exemption from the indoor smoking ban puts casino workers, not to mention casino patrons, at greater risk of diseases caused by second-hand smoke.

A new report published in the American Heart Association journal *Circulation* highlights the price we pay for exemptions to smoking bans, and the immediate and lasting health benefits of smoke-free workplaces. It adds to a growing body of research documenting the health benefits of workplace bans on smoking. These measures reduce nonsmokers' exposure to secondhand smoke, encourage smokers to quit and youngsters to never take up the habit, improve the health of restaurant and bar workers, and reduce hospital admissions for heart attacks, stroke, asthma, and other pulmonary events after their implementation.

Funded by the National Cancer Institute, this study is the first of its kind to link a reduction in medical emergencies to the implementation of a smoke-free law for casinos. Researchers focused on the number of ambulance calls in Gilpin County, Colorado, a tourist destination with 26 casinos – the largest concentration in the state.

Smoking was banned from public locations, including workplaces, restaurants and bars in Colorado in 2006, and ambulance calls to those locations went down 22.8 percent. Casinos, however, were exempt from the ban and their ambulance calls remained about the same.

Then, in 2008, smoking was extinguished at the casinos, too, and ambulance calls there dropped by 19.1 percent, while there was no further change at the other facilities.

“The fact that there were changes only at the time the law changed in both venues is strong evidence that the law is what caused the change in ambulance calls,” according to lead author Dr. Stanton Glantz from the University of California, San Francisco.

“Casinos are often exempted from legislation mandating smoke-free environments, putting employees and patrons at risk for heart attacks, strokes, asthma attacks and other adverse events triggered by secondhand smoke,” Glantz said. “The message to policymakers is clear: stop granting casino exemptions. They lead to a substantial number of people being sent to the hospital, often at taxpayer expense, something that is completely preventable.”

The message for Nevada is equally clear: It’s time to end big gaming’s exemption from the Nevada Clean Indoor Air Act.

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