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American Lung Association of California Gives Failing Grades To 70% of Bay Area Cities and Counties For Smoke Free Laws

(EMERYVILLE, January 29, 2008) - The American Lung Association of California issued failing grades to 73 cities and three counties in the Bay Area for lack of policies to protect residents from secondhand smoke in outdoor areas or multi-unit housing.

At a news conference Tuesday at the Sojourner Truth Manor, a senior housing facility, the American Lung Association issued its annual State of Tobacco Control report card to highlight successes and failures of 108 cities and counties in the Bay Area to reduce exposure to secondhand smoke in their communities. Cities and counties were given an overall grade based on five categories: Housing, recreation areas, outdoor dining, entryways, and outdoor services areas, and whether or not they required licenses for any merchant selling tobacco.

“Too many cities and counties are still not protecting the health of local residents who are exposed to their neighbors’ harmful secondhand smoke,” said Serena Chen, tobacco policy director for the American Lung Association of California. “It’s time for local government to follow the lead of cities like Belmont, Oakland and Berkeley and step up to the plate.”

Overall, six cities earned an “A” grade: Belmont, Berkeley, Emeryville, Oakland, Contra Costa County (unincorporated areas), and Ross. Five cities earned “B” grades: Dublin, Newark, Marin County (unincorporated areas), San Anselmo and Santa Rosa.

Cities with a “C” grade were: San Jose, San Ramon, Palo Alto, Healdsburg, and the unincorporated areas of Alameda and San Mateo counties.

The second largest city in the Bay Area, San Francisco, was among the 18 cities that only managed a “D” grade.

Fourteen cities and three counties earned D grades. Seventy three cities earned an F grade, along with Sonoma and Santa Clara counties. “With more than half of our cities with F grades, at least 2.5 million residents are at risk for disease from exposures to secondhand smoke.”

While many communities have adopted smoke free outdoor ordinances, including parks and dining areas, protections are still lacking for the hundreds of thousands of Bay Area residents who live in multi-unit housing. Secondhand smoke can cause fatal heart attacks, lung cancer, emphysema, and asthma. For elderly citizens, especially those with chronic diseases like diabetes and heart or lung conditions, even small amounts of secondhand smoke can delay their healing and/or sicken them. In apartment buildings, up to 60 percent of the air in each unit is from other units.

Chen said there has been a sea change in attitudes toward the need to protect the public from secondhand smoke in their homes. “2007 was the year of smoke-free housing in the Bay Area and taking the lead was the City of Belmont. Many other cities and counties are now taking a hard look at it.”

Affordable housing developers such as Christian Church Homes are pledging to create smoke-free properties whenever possible,” she said. “There is a groundswell of support. Smoke-free housing is the new frontier in California’s ongoing effort to protect the public from the health dangers posed by secondhand smoke.”

The demand for smoke-free multi-unit housing is high in the Bay Area, said Chen, where a large percentage of the housing stock is multi-unit residences.

“Secondhand smoke cannot be vented easily. It expands into all available spaces in an apartment building. We receive countless calls from renters who are suffering from drifting tobacco smoke coming into their units from vents, under doorways, from people smoking outside on their balconies and coming back into the windows,” said Chen. “Tenants need protections from deadly tobacco smoke.”

On Oct. 9, Belmont adopted an ordinance that bans smoking in all units of multistory, multiunit residences, including balconies and patios. The ordinance will go into effect next year. The strongest smoke-free housing policy was passed in Temecula in May. It requires landlords to designate 25 percent of their units as nonsmoking in all new and existing multi-unit residences with 10 or more units. The nonsmoking units must be separated from the other units to the maximum extent possible.

On Dec. 4, the City of Oakland became the only city in California to require that landlords and condominium sellers disclose to potential renters and buyers the smoking designations of the units and how the complexes handle drifting smoke complaints. A resounding 83 percent of Oakland residents who responded to a city survey supported disclosure. In addition, Oakland requires all common outdoor and indoor areas be non-smoking.

Seniors are leading the way in the new battle for smoke-free housing in part because many live in communal environments and they feel they are susceptible to the health and safety hazards of smoking. Sojourner Truth Manor in Oakland recently adopted a new non-smoking units policy for all new incoming residents as well as for the residents who do not smoke. In partnership with the American Lung Association of California, residents there organized last year around the policy after a fire caused by a smoker who was using oxygen killed two residents.

“Sojourner Truth Manor is joining a nationwide trend by senior housing complexes to improve the health and quality of life for their residents by adopting smoke-free policies,” said Chen.

In 2006, the California Air Resources Board officially identified secondhand smoke as a toxic air contaminant that can cause serious illness and even death. Secondhand smoke is a complex mixture of compounds produced by burning tobacco products. It contains benzene, arsenic, and many other deadly chemicals and has been linked to a variety of health risks, including asthma, sudden infant death syndrome, low birth weight, breast cancer, increased lung and nasal infections, and heart disease. Smoking costs more than \$15 billion each year to the state’s economy and health care system. These costs include direct and indirect medical costs, worker absenteeism and lost productivity.

Californians overwhelmingly support smoke-free housing. In a statewide survey of California renters commissioned by the American Lung Association of California's Center for Tobacco Policy & Organizing, 69 percent favored requiring all apartment complexes to set aside nonsmoking sections.

"People want it," said Chen. "We are getting calls from cities and counties all over the Bay Area. Local governments are recognizing that they can't allow their constituents to be poisoned by their neighbors' smoke."

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