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A Smoke-Free Law in the Heart of Tobacco Country

Ellen Hahn, D.N.S., R.N., 2000 Fellow, Developing Leadership in Substance Abuse

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As Ellen Hahn, D.N.S., R.N., drove through Lexington, Kentucky to begin a new job in 1993, she saw something that stopped her cold.



Ellen Hahn, D.N.S., R.N.

2000 Fellow, Developing Leadership in
Substance Abuse

A young woman and a small boy—no more than four years old—were walking along the street. The woman was smoking a cigarette and sharing it with her boy. She'd take a puff and then give it to him for a puff.

As Hahn watched the two sharing a cigarette she was stunned. And she knew she had landed in tobacco country—a far cry from her life in Indiana where she recently completed her doctorate.

Hahn moved to Lexington to take a job as an assistant professor at the College of Nursing at the University of Kentucky. Watching the woman and the child made her realize she was moving into a community with different expectations about tobacco. It was a community she wanted to become part of and influence.

Intimidation

But it wasn't easy and Hahn learned about tactics of intimidation. Once, she testified before a state legislative committee in favor of a law that would make it more difficult for youth to purchase cigarettes. A state senator saw the testimony, became enraged and promptly called the president of the University of Kentucky to complain about Hahn. In response, the president insisted that Hahn take the day she testified as a vacation day.

"The stories I told [about attempts to intimidate me] are why [the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation] RWJF picked me as a fellow [in *Developing Leadership in Reducing Substance Abuse*]," she said. "I told them how I was intimidated. I think they realized that doing tobacco control in a tobacco state is different from that in other states."

She said she applied for the fellowship because she knew she needed help in addressing tobacco use in Kentucky. In 2000, Hahn became a member of the first class of fellows in the program.

Hahn hoped to use her fellowship to develop coalitions with other tobacco control advocates around the country and tobacco policy researchers from southern states. She also wanted to develop a deeper understanding of how to blend policy and advocacy.

A Radical Idea

Not long after beginning her fellowship, the vice mayor of Lexington appointed Hahn to the Lexington-Fayette County Task Force on Indoor Smoking. The charge of the group was to consider the idea of eliminating smoking in public places in Lexington.

Hahn had a personal as well as professional interest in seeing things change. As a child, both her parents smoked in the home and Hahn developed a mild to moderate form of emphysema as a result. It was difficult for her to go to restaurants in Lexington without feeling ill from the effects of other people smoking.

For the next two and a half years, Hahn provided leadership to the Smoke Free Lexington campaign, a group organized to push for legislative changes. During that time, Hahn and her colleagues faced steady resistance from tobacco companies, politicians and others. The vice mayor of Lexington insisted that representatives of the tobacco growing community and the hospitality industry also serve on the task force.

Hahn was the only researcher on the task force. Her job was to communicate research findings in the most credible way possible. But she was also an advocate.

Her work with other fellows and with the late John Slade, M.D., the first national program director of *Developing Leadership*, helped her learn how to balance those roles.

"One of the most valuable things I learned was how to blend science and advocacy," she said. "In the fellowship we talked a lot about how you wear both hats. How do you be an advocate and not bias your research? How does the public understand that?"

Her work paid off.

Groundbreaking Smoke-free Ordinance

On July 1, 2003, the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Council passed a law banning smoking in all public buildings including restaurants, bars, racetracks, bowling alleys and bingo halls.

This was the first smoke free ordinance in Kentucky and the only comprehensive one in a tobacco growing state.

"I always credit RWJF with providing me with the leadership to help Lexington go smoke free," Hahn said. "One skill I learned was when to step back. An important part of leadership is not always taking the credit but putting other people out there. I feel like I got a lot from the readings and interactions with the fellows."

Expanding the Vision

Hahn said she also broadened her perspective.

Her mentor, Frank Chaloupka, Ph.D., is professor of economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research focuses on economic analyses of substance use and abuse.

It was the first time that Hahn had worked with an economist. Since that time, she has added economists to her team of researchers.

"Because the fellowship was so diverse in terms of color, background and substance I felt that it gave me the confidence and skills to work with a diverse research team," she said. "Up until that time I had done my own thing. I had not reached out to other departments. Now I have international co-investigators. The fellowship helped catapult my work with different disciplines."

Since the Lexington smoke-free law went into effect, 14 more communities in Kentucky have enacted smoke-free laws.

Expanding the Knowledge Base and Moving Forward

A 2006 study, co-authored by Hahn found that the percentage of adult smokers in Lexington dropped by nearly one-third since Lexington's indoor smoke-free law was implemented in April 2004. (The study is available [online](#).)

Hahn also collaborated with James L. Repace, M.Sc., who received an *Innovators Combating Substance Abuse* award from RWJF to monitor the air quality of restaurants, bars and other venues in Lexington and Louisville before and after the smoke-free ordinance went into effect (see the [Bibliography](#) for details).

Since ending her fellowship, Hahn has received a grant from RWJF (ID# 052392) as part of its national program *Tobacco Policy Change: A Collaborative for Healthier Communities and States*. This program provides organizations with funding to support public education, advocacy, communications and outreach.

Hahn used the funds to create the [Kentucky Center for Smoke-Free Policy](#). The center works to provide rural and urban communities in Kentucky with science-based strategies to advance smoke-free policies. Staff members also work to educate citizens and policymakers about the importance of smoke-free environments. The center is now jointly funded by the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, Humana Foundation and the Kentucky Department for Public Health.

In 2004, Hahn and colleagues received a two-year \$241,790 research grant from the RWJF *Substance Abuse Policy Research Program*. Through the grant, titled "Smoke-Free Laws and Employee Turnover," she and her colleagues conducted a study on the effect of smoke-free laws on employee turnover and training costs using a data set from a large national restaurant chain (see the [Bibliography](#) for details).

In 2007 Hahn received a five-year \$3.17 million grant from the [National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute](#) at the [National Institutes of Health](#). Through that grant, titled "An Intervention for Promoting Smoke-Free Policy in Rural Kentucky", she and her colleagues will test the readiness of rural communities to adopt smoke-free policies.

Looking back at the fellowship, Hahn said she did not fully realize what she was getting into.

"I did not expect the amount of diversity. I did not realize what it was going to entail," she said. "It exceeded my best expectations. We were the first class so there were a lot of bumps and starts. I really appreciate it more and more now that it's over. Sometimes it was frustrating. I'd go to meetings and wonder what I learned. But afterward you realize it was just what you needed to move forward."

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