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Smoke-free policies should extend outdoors

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Outdoor smoke-free policies are becoming more common. In 2008, most of the Lexington health-care facilities became tobacco-free. By the end of 2010, most health-care facilities in the United States will be smoke-free or tobacco-free.

In 2009, the University of Kentucky implemented a tobacco-free policy covering all places, indoors and out. To date, all workplaces in Lexington-Fayette County are smoke-free inside by ordinance, and some voluntarily prohibit smoking outdoors on the grounds as well. Some restaurants/bars have decided to provide smoke-free outdoor dining to protect workers and patrons.

The primary intent of smoke-free campus policies is to create an environment that values the health of employees, patients, students and visitors. Tobacco-free institutions typically provide resources to help smokers quit. For example, UK provides 12 weeks of free nicotine-replacement products and behavioral support for those who want to quit (go to UKY.edu/tobaccofree for more information). Many UK employees and students have quit since the policy went into effect.

Another goal of smoke-free campus policies is to protect people from breathing the nearly 250 chemicals in

secondhand smoke that are known to be toxic and to cause heart disease, cancer and serious breathing problems.

There is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. Yet many in Kentucky remain exposed. To date, 27 communities are smoke-free, and in 17 of those, local laws or regulations cover all workplaces and enclosed public places. Most of the laws require that people smoke only at a reasonable distance from entry ways, secondhand smoke can drift inside or can concentrate in outdoor spaces where smoking is allowed. As a result, people who work in these outdoor spaces can be exposed to harmful levels of secondhand smoke.

There is emerging science that outdoor tobacco smoke is harmful, especially for workers who endure long periods of exposure to smoke in confined outdoor areas. Outdoor smoke can be just as dangerous as secondhand smoke indoors, depending on the number of smokers, how close they are and wind conditions. Servers and bartenders who spend hours in outdoor smoking sections have significantly more secondhand smoke exposure compared with the those working in smoke-free outdoor areas. Outdoor restaurant or pub workers who spend a significant portion of their time within a few feet of smokers are likely to inhale large amounts of outdoor smoke during a work shift.

Simple separation of smokers within the same outdoor airspace does not eliminate exposure to outdoor smoke. Depending on the wind conditions and the number of smokers, for example, there might be high levels of toxic outdoor smoke in designated outdoor smoking areas, polluting the surrounding space. The general recommendation is to stay at least 5 feet away from one smoker and at least 20 feet away from more than one smoker, depending on wind conditions. Making your home and car smoke-free and asking people to smoke 20 feet from doors, windows or vents can provide some protection from outdoor smoke.

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