



American
Heart
Association.

Community Voices Drive Support for Smoke-Free Policy

Heart REACH El Paso

CDC Success Story

At a glance

Horizon City, a suburb of El Paso, Texas, was the last municipality in El Paso County without a smoke-free policy for public places, places of employment and some outdoor spaces. Previous efforts to garner support for a smoke-free policy failed due to perceptions that they were driven by outside organizations and leaders and not by residents of Horizon City. The American Heart Association, through its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded REACH initiative, worked with the Smoke-Free Horizon City workgroup to raise awareness about the dangers of secondhand smoke, educate the public on the benefits to smoke-free environments and garner community buy-in.

Approach

In January 2020, the American Heart Association (AHA) began gauging community sentiment for a smoke-free environments in Horizon City, a growing suburb of El Paso, Texas, with a population of nearly 20,000.

Over the years, Horizon City had become stigmatized in El Paso county as a community without a smoke-free policy. El Paso, the largest city in the county, adopted a smoke-free policy in 2001, followed by similar policies in nearby towns of Socorro (2007), Anthony (2017) and San Elizario (2018).

A campaign to pass a smoke-free ordinance was pursued in 2012 but failed to gain the support of the Horizon City Council. Discussions with public health leaders revealed that the lack of support for the policy stemmed from a perception by city leaders that it was driven by outside organizations and leaders, rather local residents.

Following a town hall hosted by AHA on the health risks of smoking and second-hand smoke in indoor and public outdoor spaces, about 15 community members formed the Smoke-Free Horizon City workgroup.

Public Health Challenge

Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of preventable death and disability in the United States, responsible for 9 out of 10 lung cancer deaths and 8 out of 10 percent of deaths from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).¹ Smoking is also a major risk factor for coronary heart disease and stroke, which are leading causes of death in the United States.²

As of 2017, 15.3% of Hispanics and 16.9% of Blacks or African Americans living in the El Paso region – a metro area comprising nearly 840,000 residents³ – identified as a current smoker. Tobacco use is a major contributor to the three leading causes of death among Hispanics and African Americans which are heart disease, cancer, and stroke.^{4,5}

Tobacco use in the community also poses risks to non-users. Secondhand smoke can cause health conditions in adults such as coronary heart disease, stroke and lung cancer.⁶ Nonsmokers who are exposed to secondhand smoke at home or work increase their risk of developing heart disease by 25% to 35%.

“This is for the protection of the employees because some of them don't have the choice of where they work... We might as well lay the foundation now to minimize second-hand smoke in our community.”

- **Andres Renteria**
Alderman for the Town of Horizon City

Within just a few weeks, however, they experienced a major setback, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded during spring 2020. The workgroup had to cancel two community events and suspend meetings for several months as the region grappled with the health crisis.

By summer, workgroup members shifted their efforts online, using social media to raise awareness, engage the public and gain local residents' support.

In September 2020, workgroup members participated in a regional training session by AHA about health risks of tobacco use. Participants created educational videos and other social media posts to heighten community awareness.

To secure a champion, the workgroup relied on the personal networks of its broad coalition. The workgroup also secured support from key community influencers, including church leaders.

In a city council meeting in September 2020, a Horizon City resident asked the council to consider a smoke-free policy, sharing her exposure to secondhand smoke at local playgrounds with her two young children, as well as information about the health risks of second-hand smoke for in the workplace.

In October 2020, Alderman Andy Renteria, a co-champion along with Alderman Walter Miller, invited four workgroup members to provide public comments supporting a smoke-free policy.

The workgroup met monthly and continued to promote the importance of smoke-free policy. They solicited 22 Pledge forms from Horizon City residents demonstrating their support. The workgroup also engaged Scout Troop 37 and Cub Scout Pack 37 to educate them on the importance of smoke-free spaces.

By February 2021, Community members shared their experiences to City Council on the importance of smoke-free environment and how second-hand smoke had impacted their lives. During the second, final reading of the policy in March 2021, three additional community members spoke in support of the smoke-free environments, including a sixth-grade student who visits parks with friends, a school board member for Clint Independent School District and a parent whose son required a nebulizer after being exposed to secondhand smoke at a public park. Supporters emphasized their long-term ties to the community and the impact of secondhand smoke to their health and daily lives.

Results

By building a broad coalition of local stakeholders, including community members, parents, youth and school district officials, the workgroup was able to build momentum for long-sought approval of a tobacco-free policy. The policy was adopted on March 9, 2021 and went into effect May 8, 2021, prohibiting tobacco use, including e-cigarettes, all indoor and outdoor public spaces in Horizon City, including places of employment, parks and trails.

Sustaining Success

The American Heart Association worked with the workgroup to create an educational flyer about the new policy for business and community members to support implementation as well as a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) document. A packet of information was assembled for businesses including educational materials, FAQ documents and door clings were distributed by city staff. Signage was created for the parks and trails.

The workgroup also shared messaging about the new policy on members social media pages to raise community awareness including video messages. A newsletter article created in English and Spanish was shared with numerous community organizations including churches and school system.

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Learn more at heart.org/en/affiliates/Texas/el-paso**

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