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Sarasota County government expands ban against tobacco use by staff on county property

Sarasota County government has expanded a prohibition against tobacco use in county buildings to cover the entire physical property of any facility owned or operated by the county, including the offices of the constitutional officers. Signs announcing the prohibition on tobacco usage have been posted at most county facilities.

This initiative follows the similar action of the three county health departments and eight hospitals in the region, which in 2007 instituted tobacco-free campuses. The initiative also supports the health department's Tobacco Free Partnership and the Tobacco Free Florida initiative.

Although not yet mandatory, the initiative applies to all county employees, who will no longer be permitted to use tobacco products on a county campus. Current county policies – as well as the Florida Clean Indoor Air Act – already prohibit the use of tobacco products inside county buildings, facilities, non-designated areas and county-owned vehicles. Policies will be revised to include campuses in the near future. During the grace period, employees are being asked to voluntarily comply with the tobacco-free campus initiative and seek available free smoking cessation resources as necessary.

Since the initiative is not an ordinance, the public is not required to comply. However, visitors to county campuses are being asked to respect the initiative and also refrain from using tobacco products while on the premises.

The reason for the expansion of tobacco avoidance programs is that studies show these efforts reduce the risks associated with second-hand smoke and also provide additional motivation to tobacco users who may be considering quitting. Reduced tobacco use also decreases healthcare utilization and associated costs, resulting in lower premiums for employees and savings to the taxpayers.

This is substantiated by years of research regarding the negative effects of tobacco use on the personal health of individuals and employer organizations. For example, from 1997-2001, cigarette smoking was estimated to be responsible for \$167 billion in annual health-related economic losses in the United States. Due to higher insurance costs and the drain on productivity, many employers are now choosing to adopt tobacco-free campuses. Sarasota County has decided to implement tobacco-free campuses to promote better health and responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars.