



Freedom from Tobacco

Changing a Cultural Norm

FirstHealth of the Carolinas, a not-for-profit health care system, became tobacco-free on July 4, 2004. Staff, patients and visitors no longer are allowed to smoke, dip or chew anywhere on the FirstHealth campuses. This policy change affects the 4,400 employees, 300 providers and 800 volunteers that work at one of the 30 system sites. In addition, it impacts the over 300,000 patients that receive care through the hospitals, primary care clinics and the emergency rooms and the family members and friends who visit them.

Last June, the FirstHealth Community Health Board recommended that FirstHealth administration develop a long-range plan to become tobacco-free, which the FirstHealth Board of Directors approved the following month. A task force was developed to identify communications, compliance, support and leadership needed for such an undertaking. FirstHealth ensured that the task force had representation from smokers and non-smokers, administration, physicians and key departmental directors. The group worked for seven months to create community awareness and secure resources needed for the policy change.

Staff input on the initiative was obtained through employee satisfaction surveys and newsletter surveys on what kind of timeframe would be achievable, how best to communicate the policy and what support would be helpful to those wishing to quit using tobacco.

FirstQuit, FirstHealth's tobacco cessation program, provides customized quit plans, one-to-one counseling sessions, assistance with medications and support groups at no expense for the staff, volunteers and their families. Since the January announcement that the organization would be going tobacco-free, nearly 200 FirstHealth staff and their family members have sought assistance from the program.

While tobacco use has not been allowed in FirstHealth buildings or vehicles for several years, the policy was revised to expand this to all campuses – literally taking the ban to the street. The policy describes the purpose, who is affected and geographic areas covered. In addition, it notes nursing, physician, employee, patient and security staff responsibilities. Corporate Education developed a staff-learning module, accessible through the intranet for the employees, providing information on the purpose of the policy, scripting for encountering individuals using tobacco and steps on how to obtain support through FirstQuit.

FirstHealth has provided leadership for tobacco control in the region. Through its Community Health Division, FirstHealth in partnership with the schools, civic groups and churches, has enabled over 600 local youth to gain experience in providing peer education and developing advocacy campaigns. Three of the four school systems in the primary service area have adopted a tobacco-free policy.

In addition, tobacco cessation programs have been offered at the hospital, provider offices and occupational sites for the past three years to over 1,400 clients with a 32% quit rate, higher than the national average of 25%. The tobacco use prevention and cessation programs were made possible through funding secured from the American Legacy Foundation and the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission.

FirstHealth recently launched an employee health incentive program. Employees complete a health risk appraisal and medical screenings, discuss goals to improve fitness, respiratory and nutritional level with a personal trainer and develop a plan to meet those goals over a six-month and year period. Smoking cessation is a potential program goal. The employee receives money dependent on the percent of goal achieved.

Businesses enrolled in FirstCarolinaCare, FirstHealth's health plan, are also eligible to participate in health improvement programs. By subscribing to the Employee Health Program, employees and their families are able to participate in tobacco cessation, stress management and weight management programs at the worksite. FirstHealth also encourages the development of workplace support systems and tobacco-free policies.