

# Smoke Free Union Coalition campaigns for cleaner air

BY LUANNE WILLIAMS  
Staff Writer

Everyone knows that smoking is hazardous to your health, but many people who would never light up may not realize what tobacco smoke from those around them is doing to their bodies or to their children.

Considered the nation's number one airborne carcinogen with no safe level of exposure, secondhand smoke kills up to 65,000 Americans each year. For every eight smokers who die from tobacco-related disease, one nonsmoker also dies from exposure to secondhand smoke. But it doesn't have to be that way. There are steps that communities can take to lessen exposure.



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This is the heart of the message that the Smoke Free Union Coalition hopes to get across with a monthlong campaign beginning Wednesday that will include mailings, newspaper ads and features, smoke-free restaurant promotions, school presentations, an appeal to health care providers, an emphasis on smoke-free pregnancies, a new Web site and more.

"SFU is a community coalition dedicated to increasing awareness

about the dangers of secondhand smoke and promoting smoke free environments in Union County," said Kim Bayha, health educator with the Union County Public Schools. The coalition was initiated by the schools and the Teen Tobacco Prevention initiative funded by North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund.

"One of the goals of this schools/community grant initiative is to reduce youth exposure to secondhand smoke. To truly impact youth exposure, we have to go beyond the walls of the school system and reach out to the community – to parents, grandparents and families in general as well as to

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**Ryan Graham, left, Peyton Lea, Jessica Gryglewicz and Ashley Vaughn, right, present Showmars manager Steve Haddad a smoke free dining initiative certificate.**

# Smoke

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community groups and public places that families frequent," Bayha added. "Because of the overwhelming support on this issue, the coalition has expanded to include six major organizational partners."

Lyda Taylor, coordinator of the Health Department's Smoke Free Babies program, works to protect residents from secondhand smoke, even before they are born.

"A pregnant woman who breathes in SHS exposes her baby to all the toxins in smoke. This exposure puts the baby at risk for being born premature, having a low birth weight, dying from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, developing respiratory disease, asthma and developmental/learning problems," Taylor said. "It is critical that pregnant women are aware of these risks and take steps to reduce their unborn baby's exposure to secondhand smoke."

Babies, toddlers and preschoolers are the concern of the Union County Partnership for Children, another coalition member.

"Research indicates that, even at very low levels, exposure to secondhand smoke is associated with decreases in children's cognitive skills, including reading, math, logic and reasoning — all key skills for success in school and in life," said Mary Ann Rasberry, Partnership's executive director.

As part of the campaign, local childcare centers are

being asked to share information about secondhand smoke with the parents they serve.

Health care providers will also receive packets of information, complete with prescription pads that challenge patients to stop smoking for their own health and that of their family members.

Carolinas Medical Center-Union plans to go completely tobacco-free beginning Feb. 14 and has already been working to encourage smoking cessation among employees.

"As healthcare professionals, we have a responsibility to improve health, promote health and prevent disease," said Angie Greene, director of the Women and Children's Center at CMC-Union and the hospital's representative on the SFU Coalition.

Robin Landsman represents the N.C. Cooperative Extension and said the coalition's goals align with her efforts to improve the health and safety of families.

"The NC Cooperative Extension has always been a source of environmental education as it relates to health," Landsman said.

Fred Baber, membership/marketing director with the Monroe Aquatics and Fitness Center, said he is excited about Smoke Free Union's possibilities.

"For MAFC, it is a perfect fit. It focuses on health. It includes young, old, male, female. It encourages lifelong results vs. short, temporary change," Baber said.

The Health Department's Sarah Bolt is also hopeful about the coalition's cam-

paign and her role in promoting smoke-free dining.

"So many people are unaware of the serious health problems associated with second-hand smoke," Bolt said. "I hope that Smoke Free Union's education efforts will help our community move toward 100 percent smoke-free restaurants. This would give everyone the freedom to dine anywhere and know that their health is not at risk."

To help promote smoke-free dining, SFU is providing restaurants that do not allow any smoking with stoplight decals for their front doors and special certificates to hang near their sanitation grades. A smoke free dining guide listing restaurants by township is available on the coalition's Web site, [www.smokefreeunion.com](http://www.smokefreeunion.com), expected to be operational by Wednesday.

Other efforts in February include outreach to churches, PTAs and other groups.

It is Bayha's hope that SFU's campaign will not only educate, but also empower.

"With increased knowledge about SHS, people can make individual choices about limiting their exposure and can advocate for public places to become smoke free," she said.

*To find out more about SFU, check out the Web site, [www.smokefreeunion.com](http://www.smokefreeunion.com) beginning Wednesday or call (704) 282-3539.*