

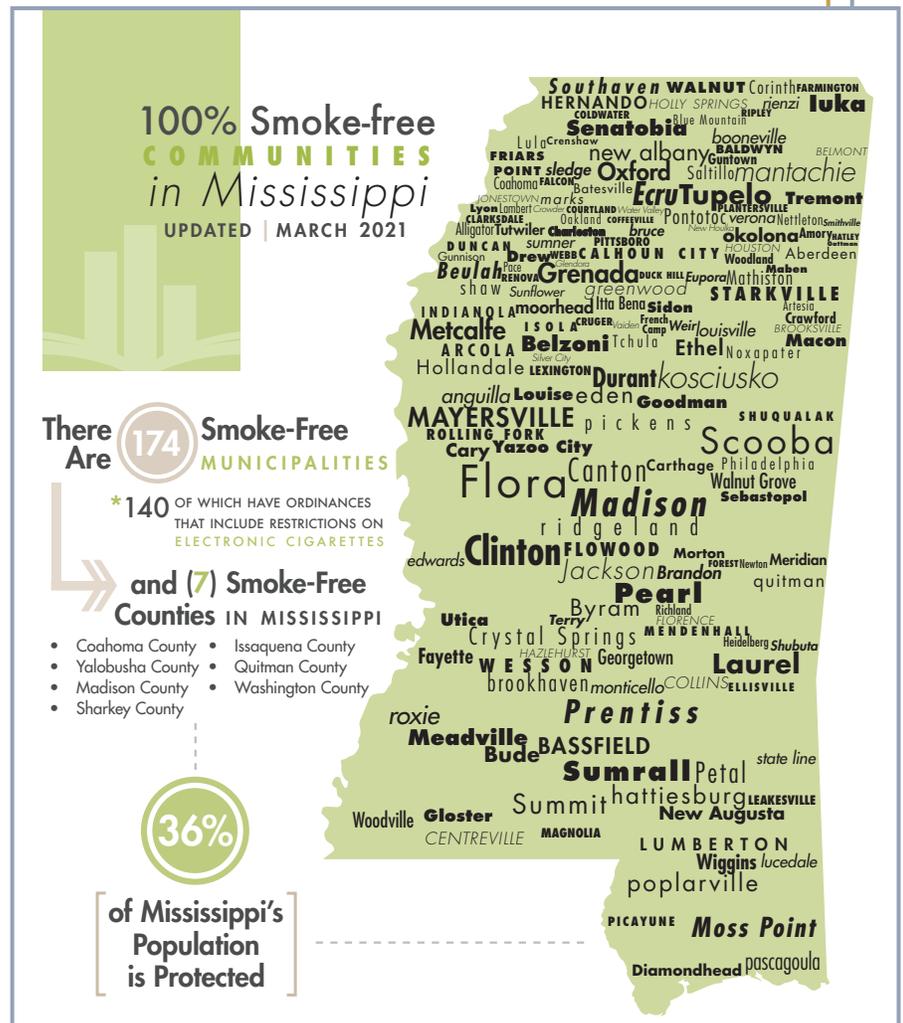


Smoke-Free Air in Mississippi: The Road to 100%

It started in Metcalfe and has made its way to New Houlka with 172 additional Mississippi communities and seven counties in between. That describes Mississippi's nearly twenty-year grassroots journey towards becoming smoke-free. Since Mississippi does not have a state-wide comprehensive law to prohibit smoking inside all public places, it has become incumbent upon local entities to ensure that their citizens are protected from secondhand smoke. With the assistance of 34 Mississippi Tobacco Free Coalitions, an arm of the Mississippi State Department of Health's Office of Tobacco Control along with advocates such as the American Cancer Society, American Lung Association, the American Heart Association, and the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi, just over one-third of the state (36%) is now protected because of the adoption of smoke-free policies.

Exposure to secondhand smoke causes more than 41,000 deaths among nonsmoking adults each year in the United States from conditions such as stroke, lung cancer, and heart disease.¹ It is especially harmful to young children who can develop lower respiratory tract infections, middle ear problems, asthma flare-ups and even death from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). It is estimated that more than 23 million or about 35% of children living in the United States have been exposed to secondhand smoke.²

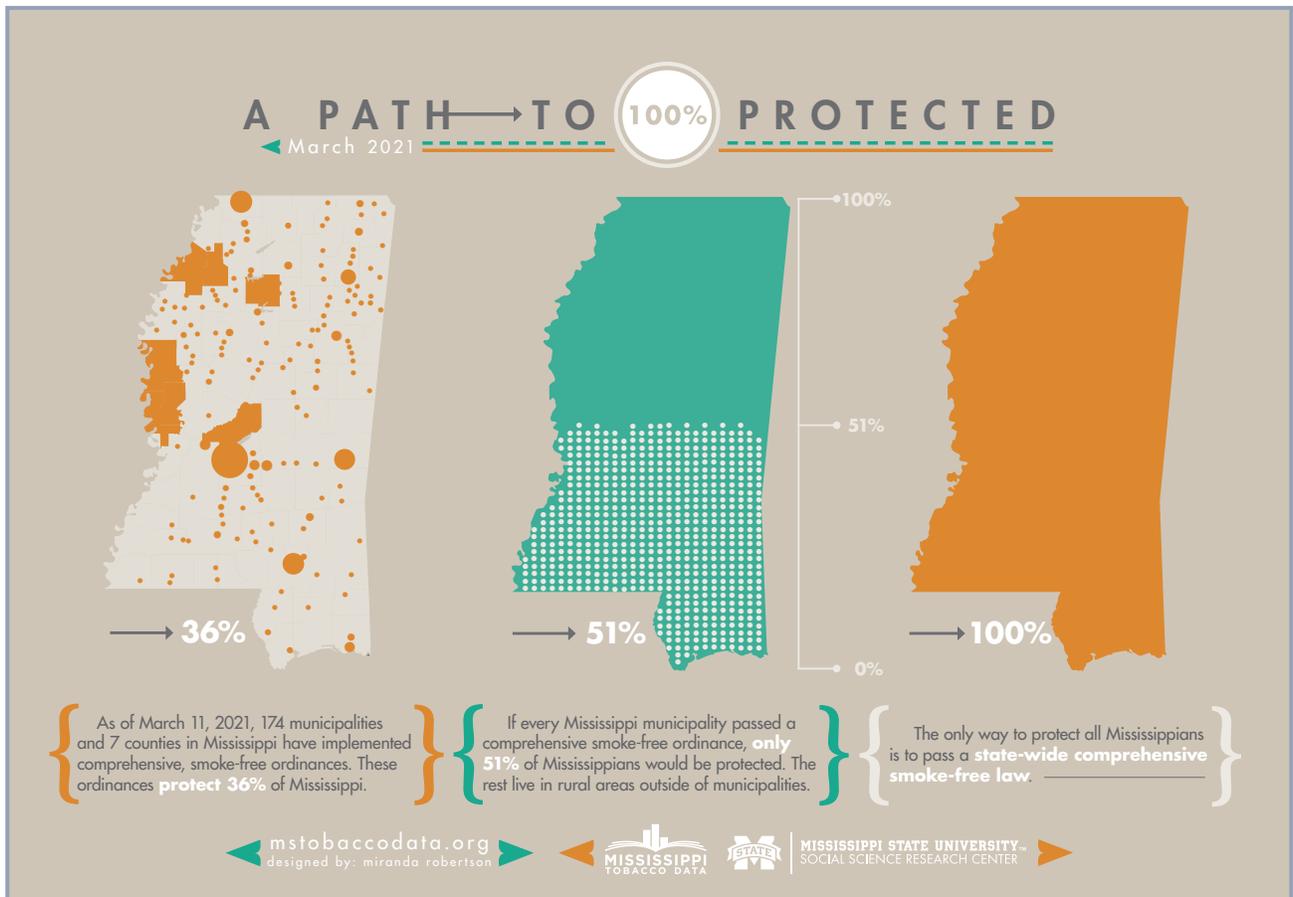
What about secondhand smoke in the workplace? Given that it has been classified as a Group A carcinogen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), secondhand smoke is a real danger to those who work in indoor spaces. Even brief exposure is harmful and has immediate effects.³ And when workers get sick, productivity decreases. In fact, secondhand smoke costs the economy \$5.6 billion per year due to lost productivity.¹



Source | March 2021 100% Smoke-Free Communities in Mississippi Factsheet, Mississippi Tobacco Data



These reasons are exactly why DeSoto County business owner Demetrick Hurt is passionate about the need for smoke-free policies across Mississippi. “We as employers have to make sure that we provide a safe environment for our employees,” he says. “Secondhand smoke is a workplace Group A carcinogen and is known to lead to cancer. I have a personal thing against cancer since I lost my mom to it when she was very young.” In addition to being mindful of his employees’ health, he also recognizes the cost savings involved. “From a business standpoint, being smoke-free just saves money. There are employee absences due to smoke-related issues. You have maintenance issues such as having to clean carpets and furniture, and smoke can kill the life of a computer, which repairing computers is my business focus.”



Source | A Path to 100% Protected Poster, Mississippi Tobacco Data

Hurt believes making youth aware of secondhand smoke danger is imperative, and that’s why he enjoys working with DeSoto County’s Tobacco Free Coalition Project Director Marcus Ross to spread the message. “We want to boost the morale of the kids. They are like sponges, so now is the time to bring awareness to the message,” he says. Ross adds that with business owners like Hurt, “we make the events fun and informative.” The secondhand smoke presentations as well as educational events regarding vaping are presented to after-school organizations, at-risk mentor programs, as well as in-school events such as Red Ribbon Week and the Great American Smoke Out. The youth presentations are just part of the Mississippi Tobacco Free Coalitions’ (MTFC) annual scope of work that includes presentations to parent groups, businesses, merchants, faith-based organizations, and others. Disparate populations are also a priority. (To find your county’s MTFC Project Director and to learn more about how the MTFC may help your community, call (601)-991-6050 or go to www.healthymys.com/tobacco.)



Ross believes that most people are aware of secondhand smoke consequences but often cite their “right” to smoke as a reason to resist the passage of an ordinance. “People will tell me they can smoke if they want to, and I have to remind them we are focusing on a public health issue and should consider the overall health of the community. In fact, there are more people who don’t smoke than do.”

“The American Lung Association **urges** Mississippi lawmakers to pass a statewide comprehensive smoke-free law. No matter where you work, **you should be protected** from the dangers of secondhand smoke. A comprehensive smoke-free law **ensures** that all residents can breathe smoke-free air at work, **saves** the state in healthcare costs and **helps curb** the death and disease associated with tobacco use. We **encourage** residents to contact their legislator to encourage them to **support a comprehensive smoke-free law** in Mississippi.”

Ashley Lyerly, Director of Advocacy for the American Lung Association

In DeSoto County, Southaven and Hernando have implemented comprehensive smoke-free ordinances which include electronic cigarette restrictions. Olive Branch has a partial ordinance; Horn Lake does not. With the opening of Google’s Operations Center and Amazon’s Fulfillment Center in DeSoto, Ross is hopeful that other municipalities in the county will consider becoming smoke-free. “People are moving into DeSoto County and are looking for communities focused on healthy living. Providing smoke-free air is a plus,” he adds.

Natchez is a top tourist destination in Mississippi. It likes to boast that it is a city “where the river is wide, and the history runs deep.” Today, the nightlife attractions combined with the 300 years of history make Natchez even more appealing to visitors. Yet, to date, no smoke-free ordinance has been implemented. That, however, may change thanks in large part to business owners who have voluntarily gone smoke-free in recent years. Seventy-six-year-old Robert White owns Ebony Barber and Beauty in Natchez. He decided years ago to go smoke-free when the realization hit him that smoking customers risked his health and that of others. “I decided I had to do what’s best for myself, and then I realized it would benefit everybody. I really thought about what the secondhand smoke was doing to me, and that boosted me to take care of all the rest of them.” He admits that he lost a few customers in the beginning, but now says business is doing just fine following his move to smoke-free. “They came back, and some even apologized and thanked me for helping them change their mindset.” Mr. White laughs and says, “When I see people smoking in the community, I tell them I wish I had a magic wand, and I could just say ‘you can’t smoke,’ and they wouldn’t. I would be out there telling everybody that message.”

In 2018, the Clinton Foundation’s Health Matters Initiative (CHMI) produced a tobacco policy environmental scan of Natchez that provided data and information to inform efforts to improve the health of the city. At that time, a survey of Natchez businesses, restaurants, and bars revealed that the majority had voluntarily gone smoke-free. Shirley Brown, the Mississippi Tobacco Free Coalition project director for Adams County reports that approximately 98% of businesses in the city are now smoke-free. She is hopeful that Natchez will pass a smoke-free ordinance soon. “I think it’s important for the health of the entire community,” she says. “For those individuals who must work, they should not have to do it in a smoking

“People will tell me they can smoke if they want to, and I have to remind them we are focusing on a public health issue and should consider the overall health of the community.”

Marcus Ross, Project Director
Mississippi Tobacco Free Coalition
DeSoto and Tate Counties



environment to take care of their families and pay their bills. That may be the only job they can find, and they should not have to subject themselves or their families.”

“We’ve probably had four or five people total to complain over the months, but we hear everyday how glad our guests appreciate our move to smoke-free.”

Willie Minor, Director of Operations
Magnolia Bluffs Casino
Natchez, Mississippi

Natchez is also home to the Magnolia Bluffs Casino, a sixteen thousand square foot facility with a hotel and two restaurants. Traditionally, casinos across the country are not smoke-free. That has been the case for Magnolia Bluffs until the COVID-19 pandemic made casino administrators think a little differently. With the onset of the pandemic, the casino closed in March for several months and did extensive cleaning. The casino reopened in May as a smoke-free facility. “We knew we were going to require patrons to wear masks. It made no sense for them to pull down their masks to smoke and of course release smoke into the air,” says Willie Minor, the Director of Operations for Magnolia Bluffs. “That’s the reason we decided to say, ‘okay, wear a mask and no

smoking.’ We just decided to roll with no smoke.” Minor said the decision has been received positively. “We’ve probably had four or five people total to complain over the months, but we hear everyday how glad our guests appreciate our move to smoke-free.” He adds that even some guests from the nearby Vicksburg casinos which still allow smoking now come to Natchez for the chance to be in a smoke-free environment. Minor adds that going smoke-free was important for the guests, but also for the casino employees. “Our employees tell us all the time they are so glad this decision was made. They feel better coming to work at a place that is smoke-free.”

Magnolia Bluffs’ decision may help in the efforts to pass a smoke-free ordinance in Natchez. According to MTFC Project Director Brown, “Initially I was thinking that the casino was going to be my hiccup in Natchez getting an ordinance passed. Now I am hopeful their move will make an easier path to passage.”

“The scientific evidence is clear: there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. Secondhand smoke causes serious diseases and premature death. The American Heart Association believes that the best way to combat this issue is for Mississippi to pass statewide legislation requiring all workplaces and public places, including restaurants, bars and casinos to be smoke-free. All Mississippians, no matter where you live, work, or play, should have the right to breathe clean air.”

Kathryn Rehner-Sullivan, Government Relations Director | American Heart Association

A report from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) revealed that casino workers are exposed to hazardous levels of toxic secondhand smoke at work.⁴ Even in a “well-ventilated” casino, workers have cotinine (metabolized nicotine) levels 300-600% higher than in other smoking workplaces during a work shift.⁵ Yet there has been pushback from casinos around the country to make the change for fear of decreased revenue. When Biloxi’s Palace Casino implemented a smoke-free policy in June 2011, the Mississippi Tobacco Data unit at Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center studied quarterly reports from the Mississippi Gaming Commission to determine the impact of going smoke-free. Although the commission does not release revenue data, researchers were still able to determine that the Palace Casino did not experience a reduction in the number of employees, slot games or table games during the year after implementing the smoke-free policy. Additionally, data from the Coastal Region Casinos indicated that there was no reduction in the Palace Casino’s regional market share after going smoke-free.⁶



Magnolia Bluffs now joins the Palace in being the second of 26 Mississippi casinos licensed by the Mississippi Gaming Commission to become smoke-free. The Island View Casino Resort, located in Biloxi offers a smoke-free option in its beachside tower only. Additionally, the three tribal casinos Silver Star Hotel and Casino, Golden Moon Hotel and Casino, and Bok Homa Casino have recently re-opened as smoke-free facilities after extensive cleaning due to the pandemic.

Mississippi is making strides in protecting its citizens from secondhand smoke. To date, there are 174 smoke-free communities in the state; 140 of them have ordinances that include restrictions on electronic cigarettes. The counties of Coahoma, Yalobusha, Madison, Sharkey, Issaquena, Quitman, and Washington are also smoke-free. In October 2020, the American Nonsmokers' Right Foundation (ANRF) recognized the MSDH Office of Tobacco Control during its annual awards ceremony as recipients of the Smoke-Free Air Challenge award and the Smoke-Free Air Challenge E-Cigarettes award. The awards recognized OTC's efforts in passing smoke-free provisions in workplaces, restaurants, and bars. "The adoption of these smoke-free ordinances by cities across Mississippi is an important step in improving our state's overall health status," said Amy Winter, Director of the Office of Tobacco Control at MSDH. "We hope this activity at the local level demonstrates the widespread public desire for a comprehensive statewide policy."

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Rhonda Shirley, Government Relations Director
The Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi

*“Our localities have been **proactive** in passing **smoke-free legislation** that protect **over a third** of all residents. Despite their great work, we still **lose too many** loved ones to tobacco-related diseases in Mississippi and which we know are **preventable**. By enacting a **comprehensive smoke-free law** across our great state, we can **save thousands of more lives** and create **better** places to work, live and play.”*

Kimberly Hughes, Mississippi Government Relations Director | American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network

If Mississippi's communities are doing so well in passing local ordinances, is there a need for a comprehensive statewide policy? The answer is a resounding "Yes." The reason? Half of Mississippians live in unincorporated rural areas outside of municipalities which are eligible to implement smoke-free policies. "That means those people are not protected by law from exposure to secondhand smoke," says Rhonda Shirley, Government Relations Director for the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi. "That's the reason we have advocated over the last decade for a comprehensive smoke-free statewide law. Unfortunately, it has not yielded the results that we were hoping for on a state level, but it has propelled our efforts on a local level."

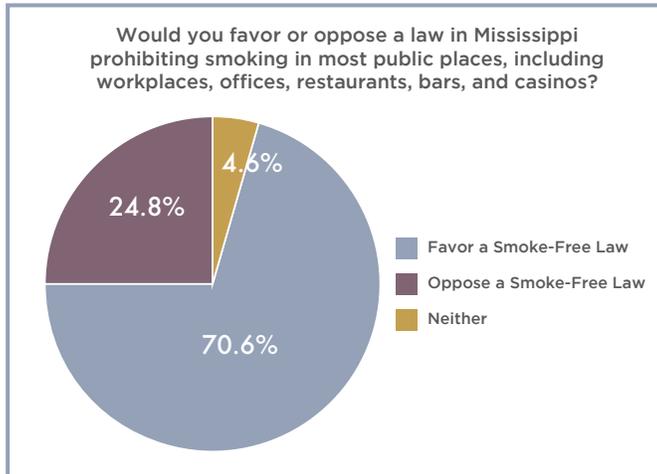
Shirley reports that many of the legislators she talks to are appreciative of living in smoke-free communities and approve of the grassroots efforts in passing ordinances on the local level. However, they believe it should stay that way. "Many of our legislative leaders are conservative on social and fiscal issues, and this is one, unfortunately, that falls under that umbrella," Shirley says. "They [legislators] often cite the business owners' rights and not wanting to impede upon them, but I will tell you on the municipal level, we've probably had as many conservative members that have championed this effort as others."



Representative Bryant Clark from Holmes County has championed the effort for a comprehensive statewide policy. In recent years, he has introduced legislation including this year’s HB 245, the Mississippi Smoke-Free Air Act of 2021, which died in committee on February 2nd. Despite the minimal interest in passing comprehensive policy, Shirley and fellow advocates continue to push forward. “As in times past, there was no indication this year from leadership in either chamber for any movement on the issue. However, the other advocates and I continue to take the opportunity to educate policymakers on the importance of limiting exposure to secondhand smoke,” says Shirley.

There are indications that a majority of Mississippians favor a comprehensive state law. The 2019 Mississippi Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Control revealed that almost three-quarters of Mississippi adults (70.6%) favor a state law prohibiting smoking in most indoor places compared to 24.8% who oppose it. Smokers made up 43.3% of those surveyed who supported a state law.⁷

So, the work continues across the state as more and more local communities and counties rally to pass smoke-free ordinances. The Office of Tobacco Control’s Mississippi Tobacco Free Coalition project directors and their coalition members proceed in identifying and assisting municipalities along the way. At the statehouse, legislative champions armed with information from advocates carry on with their efforts to make Mississippi 100% smoke-free. Across the nation, 34 states have implemented 100% smoke-free indoor air laws in both government and private worksites.⁸ In Mississippi, where heart disease is the leading cause of death, followed by cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases, and stroke,⁹ the passage of a comprehensive statewide smoke-free policy would ensure that all Mississippi citizens have a path to improving health outcomes and smoke-free air to breathe along the way.



Source | 2019 Mississippi Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Control, Mississippi Tobacco Data

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