

Three Counties Partner for Tobacco-Free Communities

Tobacco-Free Communities Grant Program

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If you use commercial tobacco in Minnesota and live far from health clinics, main street stores, or your neighbors, it can be hard to get the services, resources, and support you need to quit.

That is why public health advocates in the rural areas of Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties are collaborating on ways to make it easier for residents to get the help they need to quit. They are also partnering with schools to prevent young people from becoming addicted to tobacco or nicotine products, which are especially harmful for children's developing brains and bodies, and promoting services and resources to low-income earners in the area.

These projects are part of the Morrison-Todd-Wadena Community Health Board's community-based efforts as one of eleven recipients of a Tobacco-Free Communities (TFC) grant from the Minnesota Department of Health. TFC is a program to reduce smoking, prevent youth commercial tobacco use, and address tobacco-related disparities in Minnesota. The TFC



Erica Keppers, a Public Health Nurse with Wadena County, values the leadership shown by young people who are taking a strong stand against commercial tobacco.

grant program is part of a growing movement to promote community-driven tobacco prevention and control activities and strategies.

"In our three counties, we educate our community members, including youth, about the harms of tobacco use and exposure, work with medical providers on tobacco cessation services, and foster community support for tobacco control policies," commented Erica Keppers, Public Health Nurse, in Wadena County. "We are specifically addressing low-income populations, youth, and the Latino and Hispanic communities."

Community members ask for easier access to more affordable resources

Community conversations and a recent survey conducted through the Morrison-Todd-Wadena Community Health Board (MTW CHB) found that many commercial tobacco users in the area are unaware that there are free or reduced-cost quitting resources readily available to anyone. "We're partnering with organizations throughout all our communities—be it our Latino grocery stores, our WIC clinics, or our food shelves—places people access on a daily basis, and providing the resources there," said Emily Loomis, a Community Health Worker with Morrison County.

The survey also looked closely at the experiences of low-income people in the tri-county area. The tobacco industry has for decades saturated poor and rural communities with advertising and marketing that has led to much higher rates of commercial tobacco use and tobacco harms for living in urban areas.

"In Todd County, we serve about 25,000 people spread over a very large geographical area in one of the poorest counties in Minnesota," observed David Determan, Health Education Coordinator for Todd County Health and Human Services.



Morrison-Todd-Wadena Community Health Board works with residents living in Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties. They conduct local tobacco community health assessments, and they are working with community organizations, businesses, and events to be tobacco free and free of tobacco promotions and sponsorship. They are also working to improve, expand, and create integrated cessation protocols into existing health care services and community networks.



The Tobacco-Free Communities Grant Program is a program of the Minnesota Department of Health that aims to reduce youth tobacco use and address tobacco-related disparities in Minnesota by promoting community-driven tobacco prevention and control activities and strategies.



Emily Loomis, a Community Health Worker with Morrison County, says added resources and support can help tobacco users who are surrounded by parents, friends, and family who use tobacco, making it harder to quit.

To better understand residents' needs, Keppers, Loomis, and Determan worked with local health care systems and community organizations to conduct interviews with people who self-identified as low-income. "We asked about their commercial tobacco use, struggles to quit, and the dynamics in their lives that influence tobacco use," explained Determan.

"A lot of people said they use tobacco because their parents did it, they're surrounded by friends and family that do it, making it harder to quit," reported Loomis. "High stress was also discussed as a reason for using tobacco. They're struggling financially, they have high-stress jobs, family stress, and this is what they use as a coping mechanism. It's a cycle of wanting to quit smoking or tobacco use, but having [difficulty facing the stress of] quitting, as well."

Some respondents said that for them, continuing to smoke or use tobacco seemed less expensive than paying for products and services to help them quit. "One day nine of ten people I talked with told me the cost of their roll-your-own cigarettes was cheaper than cessation supplies, such as nicotine replacement therapy medications, patches, or gum," continued Determan. "We want low-income residents to know that these cessation programs are available to them free-of-cost."

Youth mobilizing for a smoke-free generation

Morrison, Todd, and Wadena Counties are also partnering with many local schools to prevent young people from using commercial tobacco or vaping products in the first place, and thereby beginning an addiction to nicotine that can have lifelong effects on health.

"As a mother of a teenager, I have a personal stake in making sure our youth feel valued and understand there are positive paths to follow. We value their input, and their help to encourage their peers to take a stand against tobacco," said Keppers. Events like Kick Butts Day are part of achieving a

smoke-free generation. "Students used the Kick Butts signs to express how they felt about Big Tobacco trying to get them addicted to 'replace' people who have died from tobacco-related illness," continued Keppers. "The young people said they're not replacements; they're artists, athletes, or champions instead. They're unique, and can achieve their dreams without tobacco."

Determan also hosts an annual youth leadership retreat. This year's retreat focused solely on "Tobacco 101" trainings the teens will use in their communities, now and in the future.

Communities helping one another take action to curb tobacco

Municipal tobacco control ordinances are being reviewed in communities across Minnesota. Keppers described several initiatives underway in Morrison, Todd, and Wadena Counties. "We are working on updating the Clean Indoor Air Act language to include e-cigarettes, limiting access to flavored tobacco products, and other strategies to help reduce tobacco use by youth."

In 2018, the City Council of Staples unanimously passed a stronger tobacco ordinance to curtail sampling of e-cigarettes and vaping liquids at local retailers. That led other communities in the area to review their commercial tobacco use policies, including those for tobacco-free parks and other public spaces.



David Determan, Health Education Coordinator for Todd County Health and Human Services, wants low-income earners to know that tobacco cessation programs are available to them free-of-cost.

"There seems to be a certain degree of healthy competition amongst our communities, so we kind of leverage that," said Determan. "Oftentimes we find that smaller communities like to follow the trends set by our larger communities. They can learn from cities that possibly have more resources and knowledge to share."

Moving forward, MTW CHB is looking for more opportunities to create tobacco-free spaces, strengthen partnerships with health care providers and community organizations, and build a new generation of leaders in tobacco-free communities.

THREE COUNTIES PARTNER FOR TOBACCO-FREE COMMUNITIES

People who want to know about resources for quitting tobacco are encouraged to call QUITPLAN Services at 1-888-354-PLAN (7526), visit www.quitplan.com online, or contact their doctor or health plan for free information and referrals to cessation products, services, and support.

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