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Faith leaders lobby at Statehouse for smoking ban

Faith leaders visit Statehouse to show support for stricter ban

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Joining hands around a no-smoking symbol on the floor of the Statehouse Rotunda, about 40 faith leaders and others gathered Tuesday to support a comprehensive statewide ban on smoking in the workplace.

Six hundred white paper bags filled with battery-operated votive "candles" formed a cigarette with a strike through it. Each was meant to represent two of the 1,200 lives lost to secondhand-smoke in Indiana each year, organizers of the rally said.

The Indiana House last month passed a watered-down version of a workplace smoking bill that would exempt bars and casinos. Now the state Senate will decide whether to strengthen the bill, keep it as is or crush it altogether.

Faith leaders have an important voice to add to the smoke-free crusade, members of the Hoosier Faith and Health Coalition who participated said.

"For too long, the faith community has left the health of people to the medical industry and focused on the spiritual," said Matthew Ellis, executive director of the National Episcopal Health Ministries, based on the Northside. "It's time for us to take responsibility for our own health and wellness."

Through their community-health outreach programs, Indiana Latino Institute staffers encounter many people who work in places where smoking is prevalent. Many cannot find other jobs, said Jean Leroux, communications coordinator.

"They have to choose between healthy lives and work," he said.

After the rally, some tried to persuade a few lawmakers to support stronger legislation.

The Rev. Clarence C. Moore, pastor at the Northside New Era Baptist Church, engaged in a spirited debate with state Sen. Greg Taylor, D-Indianapolis.

Moore, whose church has a number of programs aimed at persuading youths not to smoke, said he hoped the exchange would lead Taylor to reconsider his opposition to a comprehensive ban.

"I think he's going to think a little more about the human side, not the profit side," Moore said.

