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Study: Harmful Levels of Smoke at Indiana Casinos

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INDIANAPOLIS — Indiana casino workers and customers face harmful levels of secondhand smoke despite ventilation meant to lessen the impact of cigarettes, according to a study released today by an anti-smoking coalition.

The study — using college students carrying air monitors covertly into Indiana's 11 casinos — found secondhand smoke levels 14 times above those outside and well above safe exposure standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency, said Purdue University professor Neil Zimmerman.

Zimmerman conducted the research for the Indiana Academy of Family Physicians and Indiana Campaign for Smokefree Air. The groups called today for a statewide ban on smoking in workplaces, including casinos.

“There is no safe level of secondhand smoke,” said Dr. Christopher Doehring, associate director of the St. Francis Family Medicine Residency Program and a representative of the Indiana Academy of Family Physicians.

“It is time to enact sweeping public health legislation that seeks to protect workers in Indiana, our patients, from the adverse health effects of secondhand smoke,” he said. “It is both the reasonable and responsible thing to do.”

Bills imposing public smoking bans have been introduced in the House and Senate this year but have not been scheduled for hearings yet. Similar bills have failed in the past, in part due to opposition from restaurants and taverns as well as the Casino Association of Indiana.

Today, the association's executive director, Mike Smith, said many gamblers smoke and casinos are simply providing entertainment venues that cater to their wishes.

“We are adult venues,” Smith said.

Smoking bans would likely reduce casino business, which could result in casino layoffs and cut state tax revenue, Smith said. Also, casinos provide nonsmoking

areas and have installed special ventilation systems and taken other precautions to try to protect workers, Smith said.

But Zimmerman said his research showed that exposure levels were unsafe even in nonsmoking areas of casinos.

The study was conducted last spring at all Indiana casinos, before slot machine venues opened at racetracks in Shelbyville and Anderson. Students visited each casino once, varying the timing to include busy weekends and slower weekdays.

The data showed each casino's average level of fine particles – smaller than the naked eye and easily inhaled deep into the lungs – but didn't identify the casinos, referring to them only by numbers. The data ranged from a low of roughly 30 micrograms of fine particles per cubic meter of air to more than 300 micrograms.

The average for all the casinos was 159 micrograms per cubic meter.

The EPA has set 15 micrograms per cubic meter as the safe level of exposure to fine particles when measured over one year. The 24-hour exposure standard is 35 micrograms per cubic meter, Zimmerman said.

Tim Filler, chairman of the Indiana Campaign for Smokefree Air's grassroots committee and project director of the grant that funded the casino research, said casino customers and workers would exceed the 24-hour limit in less than four hours in the average casino.

Karena Walters, a Southern Indiana casino worker who would not identify her employer, appeared today at the announcement to support a smoking ban.

"I should not have to choose between my health and my job," Walters said. "It's important to us to work in a healthy environment, just like everyone else."