



Coalition aims to snuff out smoking

Tuesday, June 10, 2008

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Staff Reporter

Filtered or non?

Thirty-three hundred dads who answered that question regularly won't spend Father's Day with their kids next week.

That's how many Mississippi men with children died last year from smoking cigarettes, according to the state department of health.

But those fathers who smoke and are lucky enough to spend Father's Day with their children may be passing on the deadly habit without knowing it.

Peer pressure has long been considered the culprit behind underage smoking. Jim Yancey, executive director of the Jackson County Community Services Coalition, doesn't think that's entirely accurate.

He said many children start smoking because they see it in the household.

"By smoking around children, you're sending the message out that it's OK to smoke," Yancey said. "You may tell them it's not, but they see you doing it. And that's one of the ways we learn, especially at a young age."

Of all men in Mississippi, 27.8 percent, nearly 285,000, smoke cigarettes.

The state ranks behind Oklahoma and West Virginia in the number of adult male smokers, according to the campaign for tobacco-free kids.

Yancey believes many children start smoking because of their fathers rather than their friends.

If parents and relatives won't teach their children the dangers of tobacco, the coalition will try.

The JCCSC received a \$9,300 grant in April from the Mississippi Department of Health for tobacco education.

It chose to focus the funds on Gautier and Hurley, based on middle- and high-school surveys.

The coalition reviewed surveys it conducted last year from every school district in the county about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs said Kim Styron, project coordinator for the coalition.

Based on the number of students who have already tried tobacco and how easy it is to get, Gautier and Hurley topped the list.

Styron said these two areas were chosen because they showed the highest need of all districts that weren't receiving specific help already.

The "Community for a smoke free environment" grant will fund several programs in the Gautier and Hurley areas.

The American Lung Association will offer free classes in Hurley to those who smoke and want to quit.

A family fun day to raise tobacco awareness will take place on June 28.

The grant also funded a program called the League of Youth Voices, Styron said. It is a group assembled to identify relevant issues in Jackson County.

The students are working to sponsor an ad campaign that involves anti-smoking billboards. They have planned a leadership day at the ropes challenge course on the Jackson County campus of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College.

The grant also allowed the coalition to add a tobacco education section to its Web site and send out online newsletters every other month with prevention information.

Yancey said the coalition is attacking the tobacco problem on two fronts: children and adults. But a focus on children will pay the highest dividends, he said.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," Yancey said. "The state spends \$485 million in health costs to treat male smokers. The more we're able to help youths and prevent them from smoking, we see that as a great benefit to the state and taxpayers."

The grant is a partial-year grant that began April 25 and ends July 1.

Yancey said he hopes to receive another grant and team with local police and tobacco vendors to prevent underage children from illegally buying cigarettes.

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