Won't You Be My Tobacco-free Neighbor?

Implementing tobacco-free policies that go beyond your front door

Introduction

Creating tobacco-free environments that prioritize health and recovery is a powerful way for behavioral health organizations to support people in their journeys to better health. People with mental health and substance use conditions are particularly vulnerable to the harmful impacts of tobacco, facing a disproportionately higher risk of commercial tobacco use, which often leads to significant long-term health challenges and co-morbidities (Loretan et al., 2022; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). Implementing tobacco-free policies not only enhances physical wellbeing but also aligns with holistic treatment goals, fostering overall wellness and helping to reduce tobacco-related disparities among these vulnerable populations (Public Health Law Center, 2022). But comprehensive tobacco-free policies also need to extend beyond the building to outdoor areas including the facility's grounds, making collaboration with neighboring businesses crucial to creating a healthier community for all.

This guide will empower organizations to build robust partnerships, amplify messaging and foster healthier environments for all community members. It explores building community support, emphasizing the collective role of behavioral health organizations and their neighbors in fostering healthier environments and building tobacco-free communities. To support organizations and their neighbors in collaborating on tobacco-free initiatives, this implementation guide offers:

- Meaningful engagement strategies for neighboring businesses and the community at large.
- Effective messaging and resource-sharing strategies.
- Solutions for addressing common barriers to engagement in tobacco-free initiatives.

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Gathering Community Support for Tobacco-free Living

Implementing a tobacco-free policy is an important step for creating an environment that supports overall health and wellbeing. It is a proactive stance in reducing the harms associated with tobacco use and creating a supportive atmosphere for those who wish to start or maintain a tobacco-free lifestyle. Executing a comprehensive tobacco-free policy involves more than establishing rules—it requires a strategic approach with four essential components:

- **Comprehensive tobacco-free policy language:** A clear tobacco-free policy sets the foundation by defining what is prohibited and where.

- **Tobacco treatment and recovery resources:** Focusing on client-centered tobacco treatment interventions, such as counseling, referrals and follow-up care, ensures ongoing support for people affected by the policy.

- **Workforce capacity:** Equipping staff with the necessary tools, information and training ensures effective implementation and compliance.

- **Community support:** Engaging neighbors and community members is crucial to creating an environment that supports continued policy success.

Key steps for going tobacco-free

In addition to using a strategic approach, successful tobacco-free policy implementation requires a multifaceted process that demands careful planning and community involvement. The process for taking your facility tobacco-free can be described by these 10 key steps:

Convene Your Wellness Committee	Provide Education
Create Your Change Plan	Offer Tobacco Cessation Services
Draft Your Policy	Launch Your Policy
Communicate Your Plan	Enforce Your Policy
Build Community Support	Evaluate Your Program

Engage your community for greater impact

You can enhance sustainability through building community support. Engage everyone who works in and receives services from the facility and get buy-in from neighboring businesses and community members. Gathering input and communicating transparently to your neighbors and community fosters a sense of ownership and cooperation. By implementing the policy in stages and prioritizing community support, you pave the way for a healthier, tobacco-free environment.

Working with neighboring businesses and the broader community to transition to a tobacco-free environment makes the initiative more effective and develops a stronger collective message of health and wellbeing. By partnering with nearby businesses, organizations can:

- **Collaborate meaningfully:** Joining forces with neighboring businesses creates a united front for promoting a tobacco-free environment. This collective effort amplifies messaging and awareness, encourages community-wide conversations about the health benefits of a tobacco-free lifestyle and supports tobacco treatment efforts.

- **Create a healthier environment:** Collaborative efforts enable the establishment of tobacco-free policies across local areas. This eliminates confusion over designated smoking areas, so everyone can enjoy clean air free from harmful secondhand smoke. It also prevents tobacco users from simply migrating to nearby businesses to use tobacco.

- **Share resources:** Partnering with neighboring businesses makes it easier to share educational materials and signage, and it buoys support for compliance with tobacco-free policies. This shared resource approach streamlines implementation and addresses potential challenges faced by individual businesses.

- **Support long-term sustainability:** Collective initiatives promote enduring community norms around tobacco-free environments. Sustained efforts across businesses contribute to reducing overall tobacco use rates and ensuring lasting impact.

Understand your community

Understanding the unique characteristics of your community, such as its culture, history and demographics, is an essential part of developing tobacco-free initiatives. Community engagement is more likely to be successful when community members feel like their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed in a culturally sensitive manner. This could include a client/patient survey to gather feedback on the benefits or even challenges about going tobacco-free.

Who may be neighbors and partners in your community?

While there are many examples of partners that behavioral health organizations traditionally collaborate with, it is also important to identify new organizations and champions in your community with which you may not have an existing relationship but that have a vested interest or will be affected by your initiative.

You can identify partners in several ways, such as conducting a community needs assessment, identifying existing community groups or organizations, engaging with community leaders, leveraging social media outreach or other digital tools and participating in community events. By engaging with local partners, you can better understand the needs and priorities of their communities and develop more effective strategies to promote tobacco-free initiatives and wellbeing. Some examples of partners your organization can collaborate with are:

- Mental health and substance use state associations
- Mental health and substance use treatment organizations
- National and local mental health and addiction recovery advocacy organizations
- Pharmacies
- Primary care providers
- Hospitals
- Schools
- Faith-based organizations

- Community-based organizations (e.g., community centers)
- Peers/peer-led organizations and people with lived experience
- Local and statewide health organizations (e.g., American Lung Association, American Heart Association, American Cancer Society)
- Tribal governments and their related community organizations
- Commercial businesses
- Community leaders (councils/associations)
- Residents

What are some tools my organization can use to better understand my community?

Key factors to consider when seeking to understand a community include:

- Physical aspects
- Infrastructure
- Demographics
- Existing institutions and groups
- Patterns of settlement, commerce and industry
- History

- Community leaders and culture (formal and informal)
- Economics
- Government and politics
- Social structure
- Attitudes and values

To learn about a community, try some of these resources and activities:

- **Public records and archives:** Accessing public records and archives can reveal the historical influence of the tobacco industry or traditions like American Indian and Native Alaskan use of traditional tobacco. This insight informs local policy initiatives and sheds light on the evolution of tobacco practices.

- **Direct observation:** Simply walking or driving through the community can uncover existing assets like county health departments and community health centers. Identifying gathering spots and community resources aids in supporting tobacco-free initiatives.

- **Community needs assessment:** A comprehensive assessment provides a snapshot of current policies, systems and environmental strategies. By analyzing health indicators and socio-economic factors like poverty and education, communities can strategize sustainable health improvements.

- **Community asset mapping:** This process involves identifying and cataloging local resources, such as community centers, schools and faith-based organizations, that can support tobacco-free initiatives. Mapping assets helps you take advantage of existing strengths within the community to enhance policy implementation and support.

- **Power mapping:** Understanding the relationships, influence and dynamics among key community stakeholders is essential for effective advocacy and policy change. Power mapping identifies people, groups and organizations that hold influence or decision-making power related to tobacco policies. This insight helps you build strategic partnerships, earn support and navigate political landscapes to advance tobacco-free initiatives.

By understanding community history and culture, identifying current needs and assessing local attitudes and resources, you can guide the development of tailored interventions and programs so your initiatives address relevant disparities within the community and enhance health outcomes.

Resources for understanding your community:

- [Community Tool Box: Identifying Community Assets and Resources](#)

- [The Commons Social Change Library: Power and Power Mapping](#)

- [Rural Health Information Hub: Identifying Community Needs and Assets](#)

- [National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO): Community Health Assessment and Improvement Planning](#)

Involve neighbors in tobacco-free initiatives

Once you understand the dynamics of your community and identify neighbors and partners, build relationships with them by advocating for the benefits of a tobacco-free community and engaging them in tobacco-free initiatives.

Here are some tips for getting people on board:

- Propose the idea and benefits of going tobacco-free for the wellness of the community.

- Promote and share the dangers of commercial tobacco use and secondhand and thirdhand smoke.

- Let residents know about resources for quitting.

- Thank community members and neighbors who are tobacco-free. For example:
  - Landlords can support tobacco-free policy initiatives by offering opportunities for units that are going tobacco-free to have their space cleaned as a reward/incentive for going tobacco-free.
  - Health service providers can distribute free nicotine replacement therapies and information on tobacco treatment to neighboring organizations.
  - Public health organizations can print tobacco-free signs and distribute Quitline card information to local businesses and community settings.
  - Highlight the contributions of individuals and groups in your community newsletter.
  - Share individuals' stories of going tobacco-free and include tips and resources they've found helpful, reinforcing the tobacco-free message.

Tools for Implementation: Work With Neighbors to Promote Tobacco-free Living

Collaborating with neighbors and community members when launching a tobacco-free policy is vital for fostering inclusivity and support. This cooperative approach ensures that diverse perspectives are considered and promotes a sense of shared ownership and responsibility. Strategies to collaborate with partners to promote tobacco-free living include the following:

- Convene a wellness committee.

- Provide clear communication, perhaps a letter of intent, to explain your rationale and provide plenty of notice on your organization's intention to go tobacco-free before the policy is implemented.

- Invite your neighbors to participate in a town hall meeting.

- Meet with leadership to discuss concerns.

- Include neighbors in policy kick-off celebrations or other related activities.

Convene a wellness committee

Wellness committees are an integral part of gaining momentum and building support for tobacco-free initiatives. Include community members and staff from neighboring businesses and organizations on the committee, because tobacco-free living cannot be achieved without support from the community and neighboring organizations.

The tasks of a wellness committee include:

Receiving input from facility staff, clients and community members.

Adapting best practices based on organizational and community need.

Designing, implementing and maintaining tobacco-free policies and initiatives.

Wellness committees should include at least one wellness champion who supports and promotes the initiative. A **wellness champion** is:

- A trusted member of the community or facility leadership/staff who is committed to wellness and tobacco-free recovery.
- An individual who has strong ties to the neighborhood or organization, effective communication skills, and can help create safe spaces to discuss tobacco-free living.
- Someone who is aware of the impact of commercial tobacco use and its harmful effects on community and individual wellbeing.

Ask these questions when organizing a wellness committee:

- Who in the community can be effective in bringing about change in areas affecting or being affected by commercial tobacco use?
- Who is already involved in the formation of the partnership? What roles are they playing? What roles need to be filled or created, and who might best fill them?
- Where would these members be found?
- Why would you choose one or another individual or organization? What resources would each bring to the table?
- Is this the right time for them to join the wellness committee?
- How could they be involved in the partnership's planning and activities?
- What potential barriers exist to recruiting these partners, and what how could you overcome those barriers?

Advocate through the wellness committee

Coordinating strategies with your wellness committee and other partners can extend the reach of messages and increase visibility of the impact of commercial tobacco use on communities. Once the wellness committee has been formed, it can lead the charge of advocating for tobacco-free communities with strategies like these:

- Develop messages that emphasize the connections between tobacco use and health issues.

- Train partners on news coverage strategies, such as writing letters to the editor.

- Give partners sample news releases and other templates, such as email templates for communicating the risks of commercial tobacco use and the benefits of going tobacco-free.

- Invite partners to be spokespeople. (Give them talking points.)

- Promote the campaign at partners' events.

- Create an information-sharing network with partners to share new scientific evidence and opportunities to promote campaign messages.

- Provide sample social media posts and shareable content partners can use on their social media channels.

- Tag partners in social media posts and share their content.

Communicate clearly

As you implement your tobacco-free policy, it is important to give your neighbors and partners adequate notice of and regular communication about the policy. It gives them time to process the information, which helps to minimize confusion and long-term concerns. Providing information in advance also helps neighbors feel included. Don't just communicate organizational changes, though. Inclusion also means incorporating your neighbors in celebratory moments. For example, policy kick-off celebrations can promote a sense of community ownership and support for policy change as well as positive relationship building.
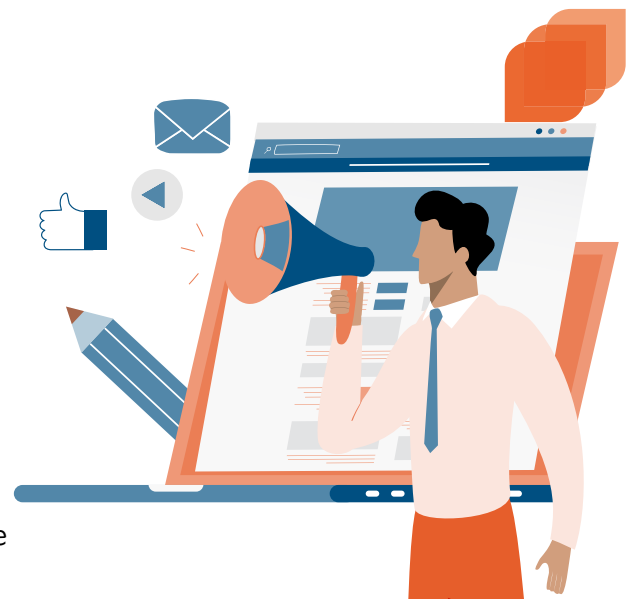
Sample neighbor letter language

Information about the organizational decision to become tobacco-free and what it means for the community can be conveyed through a letter like this sample neighbor letter:

Dear Neighbor:

Effective [Date], [Organization name] will take a leadership role on the major public health issue of tobacco use by implementing a tobacco-free environment policy on [location(s)]. The tobacco ban will apply to all employees, clients, visitors, contractors, and vendors. Our tobacco-free policy will prohibit the use of tobacco of any kind on [Organization name]'s property, including within our buildings and on our grounds.

[Organization Name] will not ask employees and clients to stop using tobacco; however, we are requiring them to refrain from tobacco use on our property. To assist with this, [Organization Name] is developing programs and providing resources for employees and clients to support tobacco cessation or symptom management.

Though we do not endorse it, some employees or clients may leave our grounds to use tobacco products. We have asked everyone to act with consideration for you and your property. However, if you notice any problem behaviors, whether related to smoking or not, please contact me at the number below.

As an organization committed to public health and safety, [Organization name]'s primary mission is to protect the health of those in our community, while promoting a culture of health. Implementing a tobacco-free policy expresses this commitment and is a positive step towards eliminating the use of tobacco in our community.

We appreciate your help and support as we get closer to [Date].

Sincerely,

[Name of Administrative Champion]
[Title Name of Facility]
[Contact Information, Including Phone, Address, Email Address]

(Morris et al., 2015)

This sample letter provides an example of explaining why your facilities are going tobacco-free. By speaking to the larger goal of wellbeing, you can connect your tobacco-free policy back to the benefits of going tobacco-free for health outcome and wellness. Messaging explaining your organization's intention for going tobacco-free can be framed as promoting community safety, facility safety and facility improvement.

An important point to stress is that you are not endorsing people leaving the facility to use commercial tobacco products. As a neighbor, you should not be pushing people onto other properties to use tobacco. Include information about the tobacco treatment specialists located in your facility or provide resources for cessation.

Talking points for community partners

Community members and businesses are interested in being good neighbors but also have to protect their business interests. Policy work can be difficult if it infringes upon the protected interest of a business. Therefore, it is important to address this issue early on with community partners. You can use the following sample talking points to address the community and recruit partners:

As health care providers, **we are committed to improving the health and quality of life of the people we serve**. By becoming **completely tobacco-free**, we are acknowledging that **commercial tobacco use is the number one cause of preventable disease in our community**."

It is important for us to be tobacco-free because **it encourages people to adopt a healthier tobacco-free lifestyle**, and because it **protects people from the hazards of secondhand smoke**. A tobacco-free campus sets an example for healthy behavior and **promotes a healthy community**."

We are implementing/have implemented a tobacco-free campus policy, which means **that clients and staff cannot use commercial tobacco on the premises**. This could cause unintended consequences, for example, people moving off our property to nearby businesses to use tobacco. **Our intention is to support our neighbors in experiencing similar benefits of maintaining tobacco-free environments**. We have sample signage and messaging and policy language to share if you are interested in going tobacco-free."

These talking points can be communicated through:

- Your organization's website
- Social media channels
- Signage
- Letter from leadership

- Pamphlets
- Notice boards
- Posters and/or banners inside and outside building

Gain community support with national observances

National observances provide more context, purpose and larger support. They can also serve as yearly reminders for your policy work to engage more people. They are also great opportunities to provide continued education and to get involved in larger movements pertaining to tobacco-free initiatives. Below are some annual events that could be leveraged to build continued momentum:

- **New Year's Day,** January 1
- **Take Down Tobacco Day,** April 1
- **National Prevention Week,** second week of May
- **World No Tobacco Day,** May 31

- **Mental Health Month,** May
- **Minority Mental Health Awareness Month,** July
- **National Recovery Month,** September
- **The Great American Smoke Out,** third Thursday of November

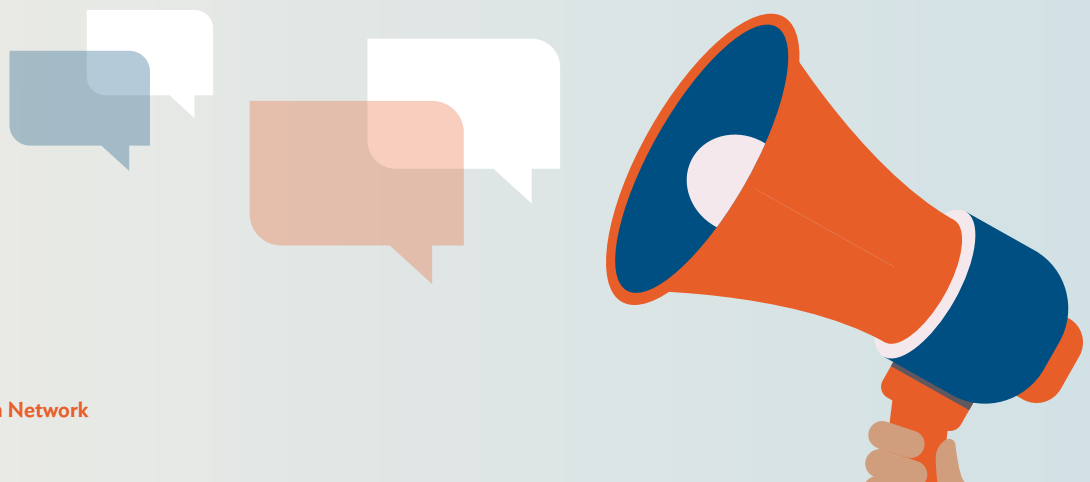# Addressing Common Barriers When Going Tobacco-free

Organizations engaging communities in tobacco-free initiatives may encounter barriers ranging from cultural norms and misconceptions about tobacco use to the logistical challenges of implementing new policies. Addressing these barriers is crucial.

By identifying and overcoming obstacles such as resistance to change or lack of awareness about the health benefits of a tobacco-free environment, organizations can create supportive environments that encourage healthier behaviors. These efforts also foster inclusivity and collaboration within the community, ensuring that diverse perspectives are heard and integrated into the implementation process. Ultimately, tackling these barriers strengthens community support for tobacco-free policies, promoting better health outcomes for all residents and neighbors.

Have a strong framework for messaging

Having a robust framework to address tobacco-related health disparities and using strong, equity-centered messaging can significantly aid organizations in overcoming implementation barriers and achieving buy-in. By highlighting the systemic factors contributing to commercial tobacco use, you foster a deeper understanding and commitment among partners and community members. By framing commercial tobacco use as an issue around social justice and health inequities, organizations can effectively mobilize affected communities, build alliances and engage policymakers.

Clear and compelling messaging educates and inspires action, transforming passive support into active participation. To build a clear framework for your message, consider the **principle, process, problem and proposal** related to the challenge you are trying to address with tobacco-free policies as a solution. This comprehensive strategy ensures that tobacco-free policies are perceived as inclusive and necessary, thereby facilitating smoother implementation and sustained adherence.

Principle 1.	**Process** 2.	**Problem** 3.	**Proposal** 4.
Justice	*Smoke-free protections*	*Uneven protections*	*Return communities' power to protect themselves*
A just and fair society values every person and their health. Our commitment to justice calls us to address the harmful role of commercial tobacco.	It's specially important to protect children from secondhand smoke. Secondhand smoke can damage virtually every organ in the body— and its effects begin immediately. Over the long term, it can cause serious disease and make other health issues worse.	Smoke can travel through doors, windows, and air vents. Children who live in apartment complexes and other type of multi-unit housing are more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke— even if no one in their family smokes indoors.	State, cities, communities, and landlords can adopt smoke-free home programs and connect residents to programs that treat nicotine dependence.

(FrameWorks & ChangeLab Solutions, 2021)

Distinguish between autonomy and community wellness

A common challenge when implementing tobacco-free policies is finding the balance between respecting individuals' ability to choose to use tobacco and promoting an environment of wellness and recovery for everyone. Some people may resist because they feel their personal freedoms are being restricted. However, the overarching goal of these policies is to create a healthier, safer environment that supports the wellbeing of all community members regardless of their tobacco-use status. This tension requires sensitive, transparent communication and robust support systems to help individuals who use tobacco with a recovery-oriented approach, ensuring that the policy's health benefits are clearly understood and embraced by all those impacted.

To address these concerns, use the following talking points:

- **A tobacco-free policy is not prohibition.** Tobacco users will not be required to quit. However, the policy will ensure that those who wish to continue using tobacco may only do so in a way that does not diminish or violate the organization's mission and values.

- **There is no legal right to use tobacco.** The law does not guarantee the right to use tobacco. An organization or business can make and enforce tobacco-free policies.

- **People who don't use tobacco have rights, too.** People who don't use commercial tobacco products have the right to breathe clean air, free from harmful and irritating tobacco smoke.

Provide resources and referrals

When implementing a policy that can cause a change in behavior, it's crucial to offer services that support individuals and their efforts to change.

Organizations implementing tobacco-free policies should offer tobacco cessation medication and counseling services to employees, clients and community members. These can be developed with your local health care providers so they are tailored to your community's needs. Only 4-7% of unaided quit attempts are successful, but proven treatments such as counseling, nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and other FDA approved tobacco cessation medications significantly increase the possibility of long-term cessation (Tobacco Use and Dependence Guideline Panel, 2008). Other services can include:

- Quitline referrals

- Nicotine replacement therapies and other cessation aids (especially for free or at a discounted price)

- Mass communication and social media support
  - e.g., posters and tobacco-free signs, infographics

- Modeling tobacco-free policies
  - e.g., sharing templates with sample policy language, toolkits and other resources

- Promoting wellness activities in a tobacco-free environment
  - e.g., movie night in a tobacco-free park, yoga at a tobacco-free university campus

Conclusion and Additional Resources

Transitioning your community to a tobacco-free environment is not just about improving health outcomes — it is a commitment to transforming lives and strengthening community resilience. By harnessing collective action and overcoming challenges, we can create environments that support recovery and promote overall wellbeing. Working with neighboring organizations to advocate for tobacco-free spaces can ignite change and empower members of the community on their journey to health. Together, we can build a healthier, tobacco-free future for our communities.

Resources

Transitioning to a tobacco-free community is not always easy. Fortunately, many resources are available to help support agencies that are planning for or moving toward a tobacco-free environment policy.

Planning Resources:

- National Behavioral Health Network (NBHN): **Implementing Tobacco-free Policies in Community Behavioral Health Organizations** (webinar)
- NBHN: **How to Implement a Tobacco-free Policy** (infographic)
- **Way Station Inc: Tobacco Cessation Implementation Plan** (implementation plan)

Sample Tobacco-free Policy Documentation:

- **Credo Community Center**
- **Signs of Victory**
- **Northern Lakes Community Mental Health Tobacco-free Initiative Information Kit**
- Pittsburgh Mercy Health System (PMHS)
    - » **Tobacco-free Environment Policy 7.05**
    - » **Drug-free Workplace Policy 7.06**
    - » **Frequently Asked Questions — PMHS staff**
    - » **Tobacco-free Environment Press Release**
    - » **How to Ask Someone to Stop Smoking Around You**

■ **Other Implementation Briefs and Guides:**

- NBHN: **Taking Your Facility Tobacco Free: A Brief Overview**
- NBHN: **Identifying and Addressing Health Disparities Related to Tobacco Use Among Individuals with Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders**
- University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus: **DIMENSIONS: Tobacco-free Policy Toolkit**
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: **Tobacco-free Toolkit for Behavioral Health Agencies**
- Public Health Law Center at Mitchell Hamline School of Law: **Public Health and Tobacco Dependency: Integrating Treatment into Behavioral Health Facilities**

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