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Air quality in N.C. restaurants and bars improves

DURHAM – North Carolina’s new smoke-free law for restaurants and bars, which went into effect on Jan. 2 has resulted in an 89 percent improvement in air quality in the state’s venues, according to study results released today at a North Carolina Public Health Association meeting in Research Triangle Park in Durham.

“These results show that North Carolinians are already reaping the benefits of our smoke-free air law – by breathing healthier air in restaurants and bars,” said State Public Health Director Dr. Jeffrey Engel. “Secondhand smoke is a very serious health threat. Exposing adults to secondhand smoke causes immediate adverse effects on the heart and blood vessels, increasing the risk of heart disease and, over time, lung cancer.”

Air quality was measured using a small machine, called a Personal Aerosol Monitor (PAM) for this research. PAM’s measure the amount of particles smaller than 2.5 micrograms in the air. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) measures these particles in outdoor air because particles of this size are known to cause breathing problems, and contribute to premature deaths. Burning tobacco releases significant amounts of this smaller sized particle, so the machine offers a proven measure of how toxic indoor air becomes when it is tainted by tobacco smoke.

The original study was conducted in six North Carolina counties from 2005 to 2007, when the air in 152 restaurants and bars was tested prior to the smoke free law’s passage. This new data was collected from 78 restaurants and bars from January to March, 2010 in seven North Carolina counties.

State and local health department staff and volunteers participated in both sets of data collection. Restaurants and bars were not aware of the air collection and the names of the restaurants and bars visited were not released.

Compliance with the new law continues to be strong, with health officials receiving only 18 complaints for 17 businesses out of approximately 24,000 by the week ending April 11.

For more information about the smoke-free law, and other issues around secondhand smoke, visit <http://www.tobaccopreventionandcontrol.ncdhhs.gov> .

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