

northwest

What You Don't Know Can Kill You

Inclusive smoking survey raises more questions

by Malka Geffen

Who knew that members of Oregon's sexual minorities community are 1.5 times more likely to smoke than the general population? Only half of us, according to *Smoking in the Oregon LGBTQ Communities Pride Survey 2006*, a report released this month.

Who knows the smoking rate among members of the gender minorities community and the health risks they face? No one.

These answers bring Breathe Free, Oregon's LGBTQ Coalition Against Tobacco, out to Pride year after year to gather data. Breathe Free is a program of the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center, which provides the volunteers and staff to conduct the survey regarding the community's smoking habits and attitudes. You'll know them when you see them: They'll be armed with the Palm Pilots.

The survey report breaks down its respondents and results by age, sexual orientation and gender. It enhances existing data by expanding the gender and sexual orientation categories to include gender-variant and queer identities. The question "Do you identify as transgender, transsexual or genderqueer in any way?" was added to the survey because people with gender-variant identities face specific barriers to health care that might be linked to higher risks of tobacco use. About 22 percent of respondents answered "yes" to this question. According to Breathe Free coordinator R.E. Szego, there is limited research on health topics around gender identities not included in the binary system.

People who participated in the 2005 or 2006 smoking survey are encouraged to do it again in 2007, as Szego said she and others are working to make the survey more accurate every time. Most of the federal and state surveys lack a gender-inclusive question.

"Regional surveys like this play an important role," said the director of the National LGBT Tobacco Control Network Project, who goes by the name Scout. "If you see a question asked about LGBTQI, there's probably been a lot of community activism and pushing to get it there."

Even if it's not a perfect question for you, Scout recommends answering as best you can to stand out and be counted. "We struggle to get any money to address tobacco use in our community, and we really rely on this data to make a case, because politically lots of people would like to see us ignored," he added.

The lack of awareness that smoking is more prevalent in the queer community is a major problem, according to Mel Kohn, state epidemiologist with the Oregon Department of Human Services. "Part of the benefit of repeating the survey is that when they're out there [at Pride] collecting data, it's raising awareness of the problem, and people see a presence for tobacco prevention that needs to be a part of the community celebration," he said.

In a state where 18 people a day die of tobacco-related deaths, the high-risk queer and trans populations need to be aware to create change. "It's hard to rally the community if it doesn't even know it's a health issue," said Scout.

The respondents' preferences for smoke-free environments show another disconnect in awareness. About 92 percent of queer respondents said smoking should not be allowed in any indoor work area, while only 54 percent specifically support smoke-free bars. According to the report, this




SMYRC volunteer Quinn Robinson surveys Eugene Pride 2006 attendees about their attitudes and behaviors regarding tobacco use.

inconsistency indicates a lack of awareness that bars and restaurants are sources of exposure to second-hand smoke for tens of thousands of Oregonian workers, including members of their community.

The Oregon Legislature is considering two tobacco-related bills. A smoke-free workplace measure, according to Kohn, would eliminate exemptions from the state's workplace smoking ban, which includes bars, bowling alleys and bingo halls where an estimated 35,000 people work. The second bill would increase Oregon's tobacco tax, bringing it to the Washington level of 84.5 cents a pack. "We know that when you increase the price of tobacco products, it keeps kids from starting and helps current smokers quit," said Kohn.

According to Bob Gordon, project director of the California LGBT Tobacco Education Partnership, his state's smoke-free policies have brought its adult smoking rate down to 13.3 percent, the nation's second lowest. "There is great fear in every community that the sky is going to fall when there's no smoking in bars and restaurants," he said. "Queer smokers in California, once they stepped into a bar, actually liked it better."

Gordon said compliance has been excellent in California's nine years with a comprehensive smoking ban. "Everybody deserves clean, safe air." 

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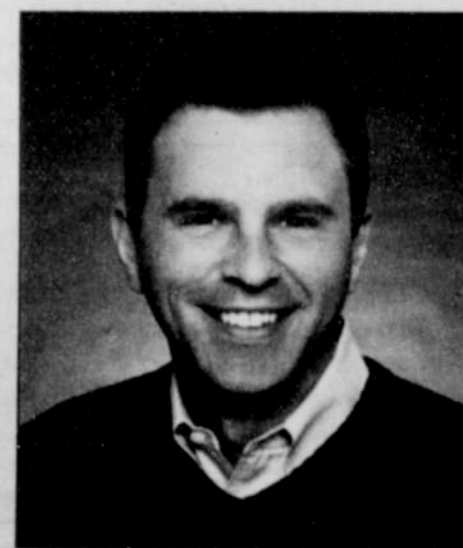
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