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Contact: Naomi Gitlin
773-929-1000

New survey: 73 percent of Illinois voters support smoke-free law

Strong support statewide for smoke-free restaurants, bars and casinos

CHICAGO (June 26, 2008) – Nearly six months after implementation of the state’s smoke-free workplace law, a poll released today finds that Illinois voters overwhelmingly support the law making public places smoke-free by prohibiting smoking inside all workplaces, including restaurants, bars, and casinos. The poll also finds that voters would reject attempts to exempt casinos from the new law.

“The smoke-free law is working exactly as intended to protect the people of Illinois from the health harms of secondhand smoke and preserve their right to breathe clean air. Clearly, Illinois voters appreciate the new law,” said Clement Rose, MD, President, American Cancer Society, Illinois Division.

The poll found that nearly three out of four (73 percent) Illinois voters support the smoke-free workplace law, with 62 percent expressing strong support. Just 25 percent of voters oppose the law. The smoke-free law is even more popular now than when passed a year ago by the state legislature – with the margin of support growing by 10 percentage points from a similar poll conducted a year ago. At the same time last year, voters favored the legislation 68 to 30 percent. Support for the new law comes from a broad coalition of voters, including Democrats and Republicans as well as voters in every region of the state.

By a 2 to 1 margin, voters also feel that casinos should continue to be included under the smoke-free law. A 63 percent majority said that casinos should be included in the law while just 26 percent of voters feel that casinos should be exempted.

“Although the opponents of healthy workplaces have tried again and again to exempt casinos from the Smoke Free Illinois Act, we will continue to work to protect all Illinois workers from deadly secondhand smoke exposure,” said Harold Wimmer, President & CEO, American Lung Association of Illinois & Greater Chicago.

The survey of 606 registered voters in Illinois was commissioned by Smoke-free Illinois with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In addition to the support for the smoke-free law, other findings of the survey include:

- Voters understand the health hazards of secondhand smoke and feel all workers should be protected from it. More than 8 in 10 voters believe secondhand smoke poses a serious (59 percent) or moderate (24 percent) health hazard. Seventy-nine (79) percent of voters agree that no worker in Illinois should be exposed to secondhand smoke, including bartenders, waiters and waitresses.

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- Voters see the health benefits of the smoke-free law. Voters overwhelmingly agree (88 percent, including 68 percent of smokers) that “restaurants, bars and casinos are much healthier for customers and employees now that they are smoke-free.”
- Voters enjoy smoke-free restaurants and bars. Nearly 7 in 10 respondents said that since the legislation took effect, going to bars and restaurants is now more enjoyable (68 percent); significantly, only 12 percent find it less enjoyable.

“Thousands of nonsmokers die each year from coronary heart disease because of exposure to secondhand smoke,” said Kathleen L. Grady, PhD, RN, FAAN, Chair of the American Heart Association’s Illinois Advocacy Committee. “Illinoisans deserve to breathe clean air, no matter where they work, and this poll shows that they do not want to see that right diminished.”

In addition, an 84 percent majority of voters believe that it is important to have a smoke-free environment in all workplaces, including bars and restaurants. “This poll shows that Illinois voters are embracing the smoke-free law as both good for their health and for their pleasure when going out to restaurants, bars and casinos,” said Joel Africk, President and CEO, Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago. “As a result of this law, thousands of workers no longer have to choose between their health and a paycheck.”

“Illinois has one of the most protective smoke-free laws in the country,” said Janet Williams, Co-Chair, Illinois Coalition Against Tobacco. “It is clear that Illinois legislators understand the harmful health effects of secondhand smoke and this statewide poll underscores voter support for this comprehensive law and its public health benefits.”

In 2006, former U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona released a landmark report on secondhand smoke. The report confirmed that exposure to secondhand smoke causes cancer, heart disease and serious lung ailments. Secondhand smoke contains dozens of carcinogens and more than 4,000 chemicals, including formaldehyde, cyanide, carbon monoxide and arsenic. As Carmona stated: “The debate is over. The science is clear. Secondhand smoke is not a mere annoyance but a serious health hazard.”

The growing evidence that secondhand smoke harms health has spurred the growing, bipartisan momentum across the country to pass smoke-free laws. In the United States, 24 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico have passed smoke-free laws that cover restaurants and bars.

The survey of 606 registered voters in Illinois was conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research from May 28 to June 1, 2008. The survey is subject to a 4.0 percentage point margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level.

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The lead agencies of Smoke-free Illinois include Illinois Coalition Against Tobacco, American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, American Lung Association of Illinois & Greater Chicago and Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago.