A Route to Smokefree Outdoor Public Transit Policies

Policy Campaign for Sacramento Regional Transit District to Include Outdoor Public Transit Stops in Smokefree Policy

Written in collaboration with Kimberly Bankston Lee and Twlia Laster
Abstract

Every day, people of all ages are exposed to secondhand smoke at bus stops and train stations. Transit users living in poverty are three times more likely to use public transportation.¹ Public transit locations provide a powerful opportunity to address secondhand smoke disparities for low-income communities, as well as educate the community about the detrimental health effects of smoking and secondhand smoke.

In 2010, the Saving Our Legacy, African Americans for Smoke Free Safe Places, or the SOL Project, coordinated efforts with Sacramento County Tobacco Control Coalition to inform the Sacramento Regional Transportation District (SacRT) Board of Directors of options to strengthen their current policy of prohibiting smoking in enclosed bus stops and light rail stops, to include outdoor transit stations as well. The SOL Project led by conducting observation surveys, public opinion polls, key informant interviews, tobacco litter clean-ups, a chalk art contest, and educational and media campaigns.

The Sacramento Regional Transit District Board voted unanimously to adopt a smokefree policy in November 2012 and later amended the policy to include electronic smoking devices. This case study outlines the process of adopting and implementing a smokefree policy at outdoor public transit stations.

Background

Secondhand Smoke (SHS) in Low-Income Communities

Smokefree policies reduce illness and death from secondhand smoke (SHS) exposure. When it comes SHS exposure, 38.4% of adults 18 to 64 reported being exposed to SHS while on a sidewalk, 13.1% reported being exposed at shopping malls, and 12.2% reported being exposed in other public places.² While Sacramento County has an overall adult smoking prevalence rate of 15.7%, the smoking rate among adults at or below the Federal Poverty Level, defined by as having an income of $22,025 or less for a family of four or $14,051 for a family of two, was nearly twice that at 26.4%. In Sacramento County, 1 in 4 people living at or below the federal poverty level smoke cigarettes, and low-income transit users constitute nearly half of bus and light rail riders.³ The adoption of a smokefree outdoor transit policy supports prevention of exposure to SHS and reinforces community beliefs and norms that outdoor public areas should be smokefree.

Partners

All campaigns are a collaborative effort. The SOL Project partnered with the following:⁴

- Sacramento Chinese Community Service Center
- The Sustainable Health Advances in Rural Environments (SHARE) Project
- Sacramento County Tobacco Control Coalition
- The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
- Resources & Education Supporting People Everywhere Controlling Tobacco (RESPECT)
- Breathe California Sacramento Region
- Breaking Barriers
- Captivating Ladies Acquiring Successful Skills Yearly (CLASSY) youth leadership development group
- Sacramento Cultural Hub Media Company
- The SOL Project’s “SOLdiers” youth advocacy group
Saving Our Legacy, African Americans for Smoke Free Safe Places (SOL Project)

In 2010 the Saving Our Legacy, African Americans for Smoke Free Safe Places (The SOL Project), obtained funding from the California Tobacco Control Program (CTCP) to move forward policy efforts to prevent exposure to SHS. The primary objective of the policy campaign was to encourage the Sacramento Regional Transportation District (SacRT) Board of Directors to adopt and implement a new smokefree policy. The SOL Project led the policy campaign along with partners from the Sacramento County Tobacco Control Coalition’s Secondhand Smoke Committee. The SOL Project took the leading role as this collaborative worked together to educate and inform the SacRT Board of Directors to adopt and implement a new smokefree policy that includes all bus stops, light rail stops and light rail stations. When approached by staff from the SOL Project, SacRT administration expressed that smokefree policies in outdoor areas were necessary and a good fit with their mission.

Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT)

The goal of the Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT) is to promote and improve access in the Sacramento region by providing safe, reliable, and fiscally-responsible transportation services that links people to resources and opportunities. SacRT prides itself on clean air and the health of the community, but its smokefree policy only included enclosed transit stations and did not sufficiently protect all riders at outdoor stations from SHS.³

SacRT is governed by an eleven-member Board of Directors representing six jurisdictions, including Sacramento County and the cities of Sacramento, Rancho Cordova, Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, and Folsom. The Board members are appointed by the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors. SacRT operates 70 bus routes and 43 miles of light rail covering nearly 400 square-miles.⁶
Road to Success

The following timeline outlines campaign staff and volunteer efforts to successfully adopt and implement a smokefree policy with SacRT. The campaign is outlined using the American Lung Association Center for Tobacco Policy and Organizing’s Five Phases to Victory.

For more information about the Five Phases to Victory visit https://center4tobaccopolicy.org/community-organizing/

Phase 1: Preliminary Investigation and Assessment

Before the campaign could begin, proponents needed to assess community attitudes towards such a policy. This involved building a case for a smokefree public areas through public engagement and research.

- A pre-observational study was conducted at 75 bus stops and light rail stations within SacRT’s jurisdiction. Data was collected regarding amount of tobacco litter, if ash receptacles were present, the number of people smoking, and the number of people in proximity to others smoking. This data would allow stakeholders to compare the quality of the transit stations before and after implementing smokefree policies.
- In-person key informant interviews with the SacRT Board members helped establish strengths and challenges for the campaign. It was important to conduct interviews as part of the preliminary investigation and refer to results as part of the strategy and planning.
- Collecting public opinion poll data from SacRT riders determined the need and showed support for a smokefree policy. The results revealed that 91% of riders frequently witnessed tobacco use while waiting for transit and 81%, including smokers, were bothered by secondhand smoke. Only 17% of respondents said they would no longer use SacRT if it was smokefree, and 76% supported smokefree transit. With such public support for this policy and a clear public health issue facing transit riders, campaign staff felt they had built a strong case for the local decision makers.

Phase 2: Strategy and Planning

Several steps were necessary to organize supporters and build strategy prior to the start of a smokfree outdoor public transit policy campaign.

- A Midwest Academy Strategy Chart session with both staff and community members helped determine campaign goals, objectives, and tactics for approaching SacRT, and how to build community support. Establishing and evaluating the strategy was essential in dictating the following steps in the campaign.
- Results from key informant interviews showed that they believed smokefree public places were very necessary, but the public and local elected officials would only be “somewhat ready” to adopt a smokefree transit policy. A restriction would most likely be supported, but might not pass if smoking were banned entirely. SacRT did not feel that they had the resources necessary for enforcement if a smokefree policy were to pass. Finally, they mentioned that visiting board members was an effective strategy, as SacRT staff was now researching SHS and environmental tobacco litter.
Phase 3: Recruitment
The smokefree SacRT strategy involved a multi-faceted effort focused on grassroots advocacy. With only two staff members, the SOL Project found it imperative to work with volunteers. The campaign utilized individuals and community groups from across the region.

- Developing a media campaign furthered community education and outreach. Materials were also developed and used online, within public transit, and with external media groups. These consisted of social media posts, public posters, email listservs and website publishing. Campaign staff also developed low-literacy handbills that were distributed to SacRT riders and at large public events.
- Youth advocates played a crucial role in the success of the campaign. SOL’s ongoing coalition of youth volunteers (called the SOLDiers), assisted with outreach, observation surveys, cigarette litter counts, and clean-ups. This information was used to educate the public as well as the SacRT Board of Directors about the need for a smokefree policy, the litter that smoking created, the dangers of secondhand smoke and the benefits of smokefree policy adoption. Although working with youth schedules presents a challenge, the campaign greatly benefited from their input.
- Community education outreach at cultural events such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. March and celebration, Gospel on the River, Juneteenth Festival, and the Exceptional Women of Color Conference helped engage residents in the campaign.
- Gathering petition signatures at community events and online through Facebook ad campaigns demonstrated tangible community support.

Phase 4: The Campaign
Once the SacRT Board was considering the policy, it was time to put the plans in action.

- Observation and public opinion poll findings were presented to both SacRT administration staff and to board members at their meeting, including a container of the tobacco litter collected during one of the observational surveys.
- Policy packets with a sample smokefree policy and a list of other jurisdictions with similar policies were distributed to the Board.
- The initial meetings with SacRT staff proved crucial, as the campaign became a trusted resource to provide technical assistance. Campaign staff provided a model policy that would be presented to the board for final adoption.
- Working with SacRT staff to develop a future implementation plan allowed the campaign to ensure priorities were accounted for.

In November 2012, the SacRT Board of Directors voted unanimously to adopt a smokefree policy to include all outdoor bus stops, light rail stops, and light rail stations.
Phase 5: Implementation and Evaluation

After the policy passed...

- Campaign staff put into action their education campaign to educate community, staff and law enforcement. Public messaging including language for both plaque and digital signage, posting of signs, sending a memo to all SacRT staff and training SacRT police on the enforcement process.

- A new implementation media campaign included bus shelter signage and a Facebook ad educating the community about the new policy.

- The campaign hosted a recognition event honoring SacRT for the new smokefree policy, which also drew more attention to the new policy.

- A post-observational study was conducted to compare the status of smoking at bus and light rail stations to the data collected before the campaign started. Results showed that smoking at public transit stops had decreased from 22 to 14%, but cigarette litter had dramatically increased. This highlighted the need for additional signage, an informational campaign, and improved enforcement strategies.

- Five years after the policy passed, three SacRT staff participated in staff key informant interviews. They had observed less smoking at transit stops. In order to increase compliance, additional security, new fines, and more ways to report violations were added. It was noted that enforcement is easier at some locations over others due to geographic area and property restrictions. Despite this, staff believed the policy was working due to the overall smoking decrease.

- Five years after the policy passed, campaign staff conducted public key informant interviews with SacRT riders to determine the impact of the policy. Riders shared that they still see people smoking and there is significant tobacco litter at the stops. They reported seeing signs, but only two people had witnessed security enforce the policy. There was general support for more visible signs, increased security, consequences for breaking the policy, and a larger educational campaign to increase awareness of the policy.
Recommendations

Policy Tips

- Seek out public transit districts that are ready for change.
- Meet with public transit board members at the onset of the project.

Data & Research

- Collect pre-observation and post-observation data using consistent mode and methodology.
- Recruit and retain volunteers to help with outreach and data collection.
- Share relevant data and research with public transit board members and staff.

Communicating with the SacRT board members and staff

- More meetings with board members may occur if they are framed as a time to “ask them for their advice,” as opposed to educating them on a topic or conducting a key informant interview.
- E-mail communication yielded the best responses for getting advice from board members.
- Board members were more likely to secure an in-person meeting once email communication had transpired.

Framing Policy

- By framing the issue as an environmental one, staff was able to discuss the costs associated with cleaning up large amounts of litter at transit stops in addition to the effect of SHS on low-socio economic communities.
- Results from the public opinion poll and butt-pick up activities at the public transit stops were extremely useful in demonstrating to the SacRT board that a problem existed and needed attention.

Implementation

- Follow policy adoption with concrete plans for implementation and enforcement, including a staff communication plan, community communication plan, and enforcement mechanisms.
- Staff communication plan should include the rationale for the policy, how to answer the public and the enforcement process.
- Community communication plan should include the rationale, posting of signage at bus stops and light rail stations and on websites, including social media. It should also include how the policy will be enforced, such as with fines.
- Enforcement mechanisms should include more signs.

References

1 Federal Highway Administration, National Household Travel Survey Brief: Mobility Challenges for Households in Poverty, 2009
3 Scarborough. Instant Qualitative Profile, 2009
5 Boards & Commissions. City of Sacramento. http://www.cityofsacramento.org/Clerk/Legislative-Bodies/Boards-and-Commissions