

**ANR Testimony
Connecticut
April 20, 2021**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony as you consider this important issue. Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights is a national organization that for 45 years has been protecting nonsmokers from exposure to secondhand smoke. We work with local partners across the country to advocate for smokefree indoor air in public places, including casinos, where gaming workers often have no choice but to breathe secondhand smoke while on the job.

It's important to state from the outset **that we support sovereign Tribes' right to self govern and make policy decisions within their respective jurisdictions without state interference, including casino operations on land in trust.** Our goal through this testimony is to provide information about the trend toward smokefree policies among Tribal and commercial casinos, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, that will have a long-lasting impact on decisions around indoor smoking.

Trend Toward Smokefree

The adoption of smokefree indoor policies across the country is growing, as evidenced by recent news headlines:

- [“Smoking In Casinos May Be Coming To An End Thanks To COVID-19”](#)
- [“Smoking at Casinos Declines as COVID-19 and Health Concerns Force Casinos to Re-Evaluate Policies”](#)
- [“CDC says more than 200 U.S. casinos are 'smoke-free' amid pandemic”](#)
- [“Smoke-Free, Adults-Only Concepts Taking Hold at Las Vegas Casinos”](#)

Nearly half of all states, more than 160 Tribal gaming properties and nearly 1,100 casinos nationwide do not permit smoking indoors. Tribes, in particular, have been leading the way in going smokefree. As the *Navajo Times* [reported](#) recently, Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise (NNGE) casinos have recently re-opened smokefree. NNGE CEO Brian Parrish said: “When we knew it was time to reopen we were not going to allow folks to smoke or use smokeless tobacco inside the building. We have designated smoking areas outside that are covered and sheltered, but there’s no smoking allowed inside the buildings.”

Even before COVID-19, Ho-Chunk Gaming Madison went smokefree, in 2015. As executive manager Dan Brown [said](#) recently, “We have to be looking to the future and what kind of market are we going to try to cultivate. At the time we enacted the ban the millennials were the hot ticket, and that’s an active group, they’re outdoors doing things, they’re into healthy lifestyles. It was a very conscious decision to be sure that we keep them in mind in terms of tomorrow’s market segment.”

In addition to Tribal casinos, Park MGM in Las Vegas went smokefree last September, becoming the first Strip resort to do so. Earlier this year, it was one of the first of MGM Resorts International’s resorts to resume normal, 24/7 operations in Nevada.

Elsewhere, longtime observers and leaders believe the tide has turned against smoking indoors. A former prominent New Jersey state senator [said](#): “I really don't think [smoking] is coming back” to Atlantic City...“it’s moving toward a more diverse economy, and that includes a healthy

atmosphere for patrons. Reputation-wise, it won't be beneficial for the future of Atlantic City casinos overall." Dr. David G. Schwartz, the renowned gaming historian at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, [said](#): "I think that COVID-19 has accelerated an existing trend in the industry away from smoking."

Health Impacts

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) took note of this growing trend last month when it [singled out](#) smokefree indoor casino policies as a "public health win," the impact of which is "immeasurable in terms of not only protecting the public who attend these venues, but also workers who are working eight hours or more per day in these environments."

Smokefree indoor policies align with CDC [guidelines](#) that state: "There is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke, and even brief exposure can cause immediate harm. Studies have shown that smokefree laws that prohibit smoking in public places...help improve the health of workers and the general population. Some of these improvements in health outcomes, such as reductions in hospital admissions for heart attacks, begin to be realized shortly after the laws take effect. Smokefree laws also can make it easier for people who smoke to quit, reducing their risk of disease."

Last year, a longtime Las Vegas gaming employee named Steve called into a local radio program and summarized for listeners why he believes the city's casinos must finally go smoke free.

"I started dealing on the Strip in 2003. I've been a dealer essentially ever since--except for the year or so I had to take off to recover from throat cancer, despite having never been an actual smoker in my life."

Steve is far from alone. Today, nearly 84 percent of casino workers breathe in secondhand smoke on the job. Even the most advanced air filtration systems are no match for the health benefits of a smokefree indoor environment. The American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE), the standard setting body for air quality in America, affirms that there is not a mechanical solution to secondhand smoke. Each year, 500,000 Americans die from tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure.

Further, casinos employ one of the most diverse workforces in the country, including non-white Hispanic, African American and American Indian/Alaskan Native employees who disproportionately suffer from chronic illnesses exacerbated by secondhand smoke exposure. In 2020, Rae O'Leary with the Canli Coalition [testified before Congress](#) stating the e-cigarette company Juul pitched products to at least eight American Indian Tribes in a predatory scheme aimed at selling tobacco products to disadvantaged communities. African American gaming employees, in particular, have been targeted for years by the tobacco industry through predatory marketing of menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars.

Economic & Business Impacts

In gaming markets around the country, we routinely see commercial casinos employ scare tactics about the impact going smokefree would have on their business. However, such claims should be scrutinized, as most cannot be supported with data. In fact, instead of hurting business, smokefree offers an opportunity for casinos to attract new customers who prefer a smokefree environment.

This approach has worked well for Ho-Chunk Gaming Madison. “There were people who were pretty outspoken about [the smokefree policy], but what was really encouraging were the number of comment cards thanking us,” said Brown, the property’s executive manager, who added that they’ve set revenue records in the last three years.

[Ohio](#) and [Maryland](#), two of the many states that require commercial casinos to be smokefree indoors by law, just experienced record revenues in March - another sign of healthy demand for a smokefree environment. Pennsylvania casinos are smokefree indoors via temporary COVID guidelines and also recently reported [all-time record gaming revenue](#).

During the pandemic, casinos have learned to do business differently, including shifting smoking to outdoor areas so staff and guests can return safely. So many Americans have become more conscious of the air we breathe, and that’s going to be a lasting effect of the pandemic. People are less likely to spend time in places that jeopardize their health, such as a casino with secondhand smoke. Going smokefree is also good for business because it will attract new customers who prefer a safe, healthy environment with smokefree air.

Opinion research routinely shows the vast majority of guests prefer smokefree indoor casinos. That’s not surprising considering that among young adults, 92 percent are nonsmokers. Further, a recent survey of frequent gamblers found that 68 percent visit a casino multiple times per month and budget \$1,122 per visit. These guests strongly prefer smokefree casinos. About 82% say smoke bothers them in casinos, and 94% prefer smokefree casinos. About 88% of smokers also prefer smokefree indoor air casinos versus a smoking one as long as there is an outdoor patio.

In addition to attracting customers, smokefree casinos save on expenses as employee health care costs go down, workers take fewer sick days, productivity increases and maintenance and cleaning costs decrease.

Conclusion

The trend toward smokefree is as clear as the health impacts of secondhand smoke for gaming employees. The good news is that evidence shows the gaming industry can thrive while also protecting the health of employees and guests, the vast majority of whom prefer a smokefree indoor environment.

You can find more resources on our website, <https://smokefreecasinos.org/>.