Smoking Ban for New Hires Spread Across the United States

In many states, more hospitals and medical businesses are adopting strict policies that make smoking a reason to turn away new job applicants. Increasing worker productivity, reducing health care costs and encouraging healthier lifestyles are a few of the reasons cited for turning away applicants. These new policies essentially treat cigarettes like illegal narcotics. Applications now explicitly warn of "tobacco-free hiring," job seekers must submit to urine tests for nicotine, and new employees caught smoking face termination. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke causes 443,000 premature deaths per year and costs the nation $193 billion in health bills and lost productivity. About one in five Americans still smokes. Smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death. According to federal estimates, on average employees who smoke cost $3,391 more a year for health care and lost productivity.

Hospitals in Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas and countless others have stopped hiring smokers in the last year and more are openly considering this option. A number of these organizations have justified their new policies as "advancing their institutional missions of promoting personal well-being and finding ways to reduce the growth in health care costs." Federal laws allow nicotine-free hiring because they don't recognize smokers as a protected class. There's no data on how many U.S. businesses won't hire smokers, but the trend appears strongest with hospitals.

So what do you think? Is this smoking ban a discrimination or a smart business strategy? Should employers have control over whether their employees smoke, even if it's on their own time? After Alaska Airlines implemented smoker-hiring bans several years ago, the tobacco industry and the American Civil Liberties Union lobbied for smoker rights. As a result, 29 states passed smoker protection laws, Wisconsin included. This law prevents discrimination against employees who use tobacco products, although the law differs from state to state. Generally, employers are prohibited from either refusing to hire applicants or terminating employees for using any type of tobacco product during non-working hours or off of the business's property. Some laws exempt non-profit groups and the health care industry, which is why we are seeing so many hospitals adopting the new smoking ban for new hires.
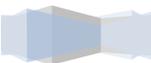
For more information about the nationwide smoking ban, contact Sharon Rateike, corporate wellness program coordinator at (920) 568-5475 or Sharon.Rateike@forthc.com.