

Smoke ban in prisons begins soon

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When the Louisiana Smokefree Air Act was passed by the state legislature in 2006, a provision in the law gave state correctional facilities more time to implement the indoor smoking ban.

Now that time is drawing to an end.

Smoking inside areas of public buildings and places of employment operated by the Department of Public Safety and Corrections, including work release programs, will be prohibited for all employees and offenders beginning August 15.

A few facilities, such as Avoyelles Correctional Center in Cottonport and Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson, chose to implement the ban early, on May 15. But most, including Rayburn Correctional Center in Angie are easing toward the change.

At RCC, smoking has only been allowed outside and in some dormitories and day rooms “for years,” and spokesman Lynn McCloud said the prison already offers smoke-free dorms for offenders who are not high security.

“We manage to keep them pretty full, so we know there are inmates who don’t like the smoke,” he said. “The dorms have ventilation, but the offenders can really create some smoke. The ban is going to make a healthier environment inside the dorms.”

But while the smokers themselves might get a little healthier, too, anybody who’s ever been around someone who’s trying to give up the habit, or to even adjust to added restrictions, knows the transition can get a trifle hairy.

Warden Robert Tanner said he’s not expecting riots.

“It’s something that we’ve been preparing for for quite a while now,” he said. “We’ve made staff and offenders aware, so there will be no surprises. I don’t anticipate any problems.”

The prison has offered smoking cessation classes, although Tanner is not sure anybody signed up. The Chainlink Chronicle, the RCC newspaper, has printed regular reminders that the indoor smoke-free date is nearing. And the prison canteen carries products designed to help smokers quit, although McCloud says the expense puts them out of reach for some offenders.

Both men said they are not sure how many inmates might have managed to quit smoking in advance of the ban, but they both also pointed to the prisons that instituted the ban early.

“So far it’s not really been a big deal,” said McCloud. “It doesn’t seem to be creating a lot of turmoil.

Offenders will still be able to smoke out in the yard. That leaves from sundown until the next morning. It will be hard for some. But it’s been gradually coming.”

Certain indoor areas in state correctional facilities, such as cellblocks, infirmaries and hospice areas, were off-limits to smokers already. And offenders assigned to Administrative Segregation, Extended Lockdown, Working Cellblocks and Maximum Custody dormitories for disciplinary reasons are prohibited from possessing, smoking or using tobacco products under any circumstance.

The new regulation bans all smoking in all indoor areas.

Offenders in dorms not already designated as “no smoking,” plus staff in those areas will be affected. Smokers will soon be required to step outside before lighting up, and that’s not always easy at RCC, said Tanner.

“If you’re in prison you can’t just go outside when you want to,” he said. “And some staff, like those in the towers, can’t just walk outside when they want.

“But if you are a smoker, you have already experienced increasingly more restrictions. And the recent increase in cigarette cost has been felt by inmate population, as well. So a lot have quit smoking already.”

Maybe the new ban will help others to quit or at least cut back, said Tanner.

Prison Smoking Ban

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In 2006 the Louisiana Legislature passed a law banning smoking in most public places. Correctional facilities were given a three year extension to implement the ban.

"The delay was approved specifically for the Department of Corrections to allow us time because such a large number of our offenders smoke," explains Jerry Goodwin, warden at The David Wade Correctional Facility in Homer.

This Saturday, August 15, 2009, the ban goes into effect. David Wade Correctional will have designated outside areas where inmates can still light-up during the day. Smoking will be banned inside all buildings, which means from dusk till dawn, inmates who smoke will have to skip out on their vice.

"I think a lot of them will quit but it's gonna take a little help," said Jason Haislip, an inmate at David Wade.

Haislip is a facilitator for a smoking cessation class offered to inmates at the facility. David Wade teamed up with the Red Cross to offer the class to help inmates get ready for the change.

"I really enjoyed the smoking cessation class. A lot of guys got in it just to get out of work, but a lot of them got something out of it. I know of two of them who quit, for real quit; just put them down," added Haislip, who quit almost three years ago after smoking for ten years.

The commissary at David Wade sells smokeless tobacco products, like snuff. It also sells the nicotine patch, and cigarettes. Inmates will still be allowed to use smokeless products indoors. The patch is another option to get them through the night. It could also help some kick the habit. The warden thinks the indoor ban will slow the sale of cigarettes inside the facility, but he's not worried about losing profits if sales do taper off. He thinks savings on health care will more than make up any potential loss.

"What little bit of money they may lose on the small profit they make off cigarettes they're going to make up on the other end by saving money on health care," said Goodwin.

Staff will also be affected by the ban. They too will be limited to lighting up in the designated outdoor areas. The smoking ban also applies to visitors at correctional facilities. They'll have to snuff out their cigarettes before going inside.
