

The Press of Atlantic City

Vegas study says prohibit smoking in all casinos

By ELAINE ROSE, Staff Writer, 609-272-7215 | Posted: Thursday, May 7, 2009 3:15 am |

Nonsmoking dealers at three Las Vegas casinos had more cancer-causing agents in their urine when they left work than when they started their shifts and had more respiratory symptoms than back-of-the-house workers, according to a report released this week by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The report recommended banning tobacco use in the casinos.

The study was conducted after workers at Caesars Palace, Bally's and Paris came to NIOSH with concerns about the health effects of breathing second-hand smoke on the job, the report stated.

NIOSH studied the work environments and pre- and post-shift urine samples of 124 dealers in the three casinos, none of whom smoked or had any exposure to tobacco outside of work.

The workers had more continue [cotinine], a byproduct of nicotine, and the tobacco-specific carcinogen called NNAL in their urine at the end of their work shifts than when they arrived for work, the study said. They also had more respiratory symptoms, such as irritated eyes and coughing, than employees who worked in smoke-free areas of the casinos.

Three years ago, a U.S. Surgeon General's report on second-hand smoke cited a study at Bally's Atlantic City with similar results.

There are no smoking bans on casino floors in Nevada. New Jersey casinos were exempted from a state smoking ban, but Atlantic City Council has forbidden lighting up on 75 percent of gaming-floor space in the city.

The findings in the Nevada study are not statistically significant due to the small number of workers not exposed to smoke, but NIOSH still recommended banning tobacco use in these casinos. The researchers also recommended forming a workplace committee on health and safety issues and calibrating the ventilation systems to current guidelines.

Although the report only applies to the three Las Vegas casinos, local dealers and health advocates said Wednesday it should provide ammunition for making Atlantic City's gaming halls smoke-free.

"This report confirms what we've known all along, that the air quality in casinos is hazardous and detrimental to the health of workers and patrons," Karen Blumenfeld, director of the New Jersey Group Against Smoking Pollution, said Wednesday. "This should help to move the smoke-free casino bill along in our state."

This is one of the most comprehensive studies of air in casinos and biological markers in employees, Blumenfeld said.

Joseph A. Corbo Jr., president of the Casino Association of New Jersey, declined to comment when reached at his office Wednesday afternoon.

"If this becomes an impetus for a national ban on smoking in casinos, I think it would be great. There's no question from a public-health perspective that second-hand smoke is bad for you," said state Sen. James Whelan, D-Atlantic.

Whelan said a federal ban on casino smoking would be the "ideal solution" to keep New Jersey on a level playing field with nearby states that would still otherwise allow smoking in their gaming halls.

"Maybe if the rank-and-file employees in Nevada start a movement there, (U.S. Senate majority leader) Harry Reid will take a look and say, 'This is what my constituents want,'" Whelan said.

But Blumenfeld and several casino dealers disagreed with Whelan's assumption that a state smoking ban would hurt Atlantic City casinos' bottom line.

Casino Control Commission statistics show that Atlantic City revenues were higher during the one-month period last fall when there was a complete ban due to a glitch in the city ordinance than they were the months preceding or following, Blumenfeld said.

Aneil Patel, a dealer at Caesars Atlantic City, said he didn't see any lack of players during the one-month smoking ban.

"During that time, I saw so many smokers, people who used to chain smoke, and they were still playing," Patel said. "I don't think revenue went down because of the smoking."

"The workers are not surprised at the findings" of the latest NIOSH report, said Al Welenc, a dealer at the Tropicana Casino and Resort for 23 years. "The people go to work every day and they're faced with the harsh reality that their health is at risk."

Welenc, too, said the best month for the casinos during the recent economic downturn was when smoking was banned entirely for 31 days.

The current ban on smoking in 75 percent of the casino floor is not enforced, said Marybeth Litchholt, a dealer at the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino for the last 22 years. People carry lit cigarettes right past security guards in the designated nonsmoking area and no one stops them.

The separate sections also make it worse when she's assigned to a smoking table, because people come to her area to just stand and smoke, Litchholt said.

"I'd love the local and state governments to answer the question: Why our our lives expendable?" Litchholt said, given that smoking is banned at every other workplace in the state. "It's just total disregard of workers' health."

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