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WATSONVILLE

\$1M to be distributed by the state's Health Department

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WATSONVILLE — Look for smoke-free entryways to various businesses in the larger cities along the Central Coast in the next few years.

Same goes for people lighting up at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, the annual St. Patrick's International Festival in Watsonville and countless other family-oriented gatherings from Santa Cruz to Salinas.

Those were the ambitions put forth by the three area nonprofit groups that received word this week they were the recipients of a more than \$1 million grant to be distributed over the next two years by the state Department of Health.

The announcement, made at a press conference in Watsonville on Monday, is the latest in a series of anti-smoking initiatives in the region, including the city of Santa Cruz outlawing smoking at city beaches last year.

"Tobacco is a poison and so is second-hand smoke," said Denise Gannon, prevention coordinator administrator for the Watsonville-based Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance Inc., which works with the Pajaro Valley Unified School District to improve the quality of life among district students.

The other groups that will receive the money are the Monterey-based Breathe California Central Coast and the Santa Cruz-based Diversity Center, which serves the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Transgender communities in Santa Cruz County.

"Tobacco kills more than AIDS, car crashes, illegal drugs, murders and suicides all combined," said Bob Correa, tobacco program coordinator for the center, citing statistics from the state Department of Health.

But the time and energy that have gone into ridding area beaches, parks and festivals grate on longtime smoker Laura Monica Gutierrez, who started lighting up at the age of 13 and hasn't quit.

"We don't have no rights no more," the 40-year-old Gutierrez said in an impromptu interview on the street of Watsonville. "We pay for our cigarettes, even though they've been taxed, and now we can't even smoke where we want to — unless it's in our own home.

"Why do we even make cigarettes?" she asked. "It's illegal for us to smoke them in half the places I go to, yet they're still on the market. Why?"

The quick answer to that question is that there's a demand, and the tobacco industry has been meeting it, which the trio of nonprofits would like to counter in its own small way with the new funding.

The million-dollar influx will start in July. It will be parceled out individually to the three organizations, each receiving \$375,000 over two years. Much of the money will go toward educating the public on the dangers of second-hand smoke and paying for the extra hours in personnel it's going to take to change the attitude of businesses in Santa Cruz, Watsonville and Salinas.

"We don't want people to think, 'Oh, no, here come the smoking police,'" said Julie Dustin of Breathe California Central Coast. "But with a lot of work and dedication, hopefully we can change attitudes little by little."

The money to do battle against smoking will be paid for by the 25 cents per pack tax levied on all tobacco products, a result of Proposition 99 passed by state voters in 1988.

Even though the money may seem like a lot, it pales in comparison to the billions of dollars the tobacco industry spends to promote smoking in advertisements, which often targets teenagers, Gannon said.

Gannon said most teens in the school system know that smoking is "old school," but there are still a few students out there who light up to either "be cool" or "glamorous," or who are merely picking up the habit from their parents.

Every year the state Department of Health doles out the money to nonprofit groups. To qualify, however, the groups must serve what is called a "priority population," a high-risk population determined by the state and often comprised of people who are twice as likely to smoke.

Because the Pajaro and Salinas valleys have a high percentage of Latinos and the nonprofit groups are located in the area, they were able to qualify for the money, Gannon said.

According to the health department, communities of color and low-income groups are targeted more intensely by the tobacco industry. Studies by the state show the leading cause of death among Latinos in the state is cancer; 26 percent of the state's Latino men die from it.

In the lesbian, gay and transgender community, 41 percent of California's gay population is likely to smoke compared to the national rate of 28 percent.

But the good news is that only 14 percent of Californian adults smoke, an all-time low.

Tobacco use remains the No. 1 preventable cause of death in the nation and the state.

Smoking kills more than 40,000 Californians each year, or about 118 people every day, according to the state.

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The skinny on

second-hand smoke

- Second-hand smoke kills nearly 60,000 nonsmokers a year.
- It contains more than 4,000 chemicals, 50 of which are known to cause cancer.
- Children are more likely to suffer negative health effects from exposure, including asthma, ear infections and immune system damage.
- It affects pregnant women and babies by causing more miscarriages, premature births and lower birth weights.

Source: The California Department of Health