

## Hillsborough Sheriff's Office to eliminate all on-campus tobacco use

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TAMPA — You know that designated smoking area?

Kiss it goodbye.

That's what's happening at the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, where the administration has decided to eliminate all on-campus tobacco use effective Oct. 1.

It is the latest and strictest move involving the ever-shortening leash Tampa Bay area law enforcement agencies are giving their smoking and tobacco-using employees.

Hillsborough jails chief Col. Jim Previterra was the first to send out word to the detention employees. He said the policy is designed to promote wellness, reduce health insurance premiums and eliminate the introduction of tobacco products as contraband into the jails.

"I expected to get a lot of backlash," Previterra said.

But, at least on LEOAffairs.com, a law enforcement chat room notorious for its merciless, anonymous critiques, most of the feedback Monday was positive.

"Smoke free??" wrote one commentator, "Hooray."

Smokers are becoming accustomed to the changing rules.

Several years ago, the sheriffs in Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and Hernando all banned the practice of hiring employees who use tobacco. In some cases, the new edicts also barred existing sworn officers from smoking in public view or in their cars.

But Hillsborough's decision to eliminate the increasingly expensive tobacco products from agency property stands apart from its neighbors'.

Pasco and Hernando maintain designated smoking areas. And while Pinellas hasn't formally designated a spot for smoking, spokeswoman Cecilia Barreda said, employees are permitted to puff outside on agency grounds.

HCSO Chief Deputy Jose Docobo said that in 2005 some affected employees found the new rules motivating. He hopes the same happens this time.

"It served as an impetus for them to make a lifestyle change that they otherwise wouldn't make," he said.

But complaints continued.

Over at Orient Road Jail, a patio off the staff dining area was an otherwise attractive spot for nonsmokers to get some fresh air until it became a designated smoking area.

And some employees at Central Operations in Ybor City hated walking through a cloud of smoke from those gathered in that office's designated smoking spot — a covered area equipped with picnic tables and ashtrays near the rear employee entrance.

Suzanne Yancey, 54, a temporary civilian employee in the Sheriff's Office records department, sat at one of those tables Monday enjoying a cigarette on one of her two 15-minute breaks.

Yancey has smoked for 40 years.

"Every business has their rules," Yancey said. "I would just smoke elsewhere."

Another employee standing and smoking at the next table was less accepting.

She didn't want to give her name, but said she still needed time to wrap her mind around the news.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls tobacco the largest preventable cause of death in the United States, leading to 438,000 deaths annually. It estimates the costs of smoking-related medical expenses and productivity losses at about \$167 billion annually.

Docobo said the Sheriff's Office has considered taking even more drastic action to reduce its insurance costs and improve health agency-wide.

One controversial idea in the "discussion phase," Docobo said, would result in tobacco-using employees paying more for their health insurance than others.

Logistics have held administrators from moving forward on that one, he said. After all, how does the employer determine who really smokes and who doesn't.

"We don't want to become the tobacco police," Docobo said.

In line with its new policy change, the Sheriff's Office is offering employees help with smoking cessation programs through its benefits office.

Previtera, a former smokeless tobacco user, said he understands the addiction.

"For those who use tobacco products," he wrote in a staff memo last week, "my hope is that you will find yourself feeling better and with a few more dollars in your pocket each week."

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