



Complete smoking ban begins at state psychiatric facilities

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Beginning today, smoking will be banned in all areas of the Greystone Park and Ancora psychiatric hospitals, with similar bans to follow at three other state psychiatric facilities, Human Services Commissioner Jennifer Velez said.

Smoking already is forbidden inside state psychiatric hospitals. The measure extends the ban to outdoor areas and affects patients, employees and visitors.

The ban comes 15 months after Gov. Jon Corzine signed legislation that divided the state's mental health community; proponents praised the health benefits for patients while opponents said the ban it violates patients' civil rights.

"This initiative mirrors what is being done at hospitals, medical centers and corporations throughout the country and supports the Division of Mental Health Services' efforts to embrace a system which focuses on wellness and recovery," Velez said.

Deputy Human Services Commissioner Kevin Martone cited a national study from 2006 that showed people with mental illness live an average of 25 years less than the general population. Some 75 percent are estimated to be addicted to nicotine, contributing to the premature death, the study found.

"That's not acceptable. Our intent is to increase the life-spans of our patients, not to shorten them," Martone said. "As providers of health care, our state psychiatric hospitals should treat the illness, whether it is schizophrenia, nicotine dependence or high blood pressure."

Mental health professionals have said a smoking ban has benefits: improved patient and staff health; decreased tension and violence at supervised smoking breaks; elimination of a black market in cigarettes; and more time for treatment and programs. They also say psychotropic drugs administered to patients will work better.

Patient advocates, however, called for voluntary stop-smoking programs. Just as the rest of society has the right to disregard doctors' orders on smoking, psychiatric patients have the same right, they said. They also argued a ban would worsen the black market for cigarettes, making them more costly and putting patients more at risk in trading money, favors or sex for cigarettes.

"These are not regular hospitals. Many of these people are not there by choice but are committed against their wills, sometimes for long periods of time" Carolyn Beauchamp, president of the Mental Health Association in New Jersey, said last night.

"We're not in favor of smoking, but we think in these particular settings there should be some different standards that consider the rights and needs of these patients," she said.

The smoking bans at Greystone, in Parsippany, and Ancora, in Hammonton, were instituted after more than a year of smoking cessation programs aimed at preparing patients and staff, Martone said. Educational information also has been posted and distributed throughout all state hospitals and to family members.

"We have been taking gradual steps to lead up this day," Martone said. "It should be no surprise to anyone."

Martone said most general hospitals in the state ban smoking, including many that have in-patient mental health units. He also noted about half the state psychiatric hospitals nationwide do not allow smoking.

The Department of Human Services plans to extend the smoking ban to the Hagedorn Psychiatric Hospital in Glen Gardner, the Trenton Psychiatric Hospital and Ann Klein Forensic Center in Trenton, though no dates have been announced. The five state psychiatric hospitals serve a total of more than 2,000 patients.

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