

COMMENTARY

New smoking statistics alarming, time to take action

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Enough is enough. The data has been coming out slowly over the past year or so as the tobacco industry investigations and agreements have been released.

First, tobacco industry documents released earlier this year showed that the tobacco companies targeted African-Americans in their marketing campaigns. Now, data released by the U.S. Surgeon General shows that smoking among African-American youth has increased 80 percent over the past seven years and that it has increased 34 percent among

Hispanic youth.

Communities of color are already in a health crisis. Our rates of cancer, hypertension, heart disease and asthma are two, three or four times those of white Americans. All of these life-threatening diseases can be related to smoking. More than 47,000 African-Americans die of smoking-related illnesses every year. The death rate among native Americans from tobacco abuse is double that of other Americans.

Tobacco use is the single leading preventable cause of death in the United States. This

Civil Rights Journal

By Bernice Powell Jackson



means that the premature deaths of tens of thousands of African-Americans, Hispanic Americans and native Americans which were caused by smoking did not have to be. Tens of thousands of mothers and fathers, grandparents,

sisters and brothers might still have been enjoying life with their families if they had not smoked cigarettes.

The Centers for Disease Control, which released the latest figures on smoking among U.S. teenagers, does not know why the enormous increase occurred in African-American and Latino youth and will continue to look for the reasons for these frightening numbers. Meanwhile, we must say enough is enough and lead our children away from a shortened life of tobacco addiction.

Every day more than 3,000 young people across the nation become smokers. Most of them start smoking without understanding or disbelieving that tobacco is as addictive as heroin, cocaine or alcohol.

Most eschew the health consequences. We've got to tell them something different.

Almost 80 percent of Hispanic males who begin smoking as teens smoke their whole lifetime. For African-American males that number is 70 percent. When those numbers are combined with others showing 50 percent higher incidence of lung cancer rate for African-American males, it is time for us to say enough is enough. Our people won't die of smoking-related diseases if they never start smoking.

We've got to press Congress and the White House as they work on the agreements with the tobacco industry to make sure that children of color aren't targeted for anti-smoking campaigns. We must develop anti-smoking campaigns that speak to our children and deal with their cultural and language realities if we are to succeed in changing last decade's numbers. We must have a comprehensive plan that includes marketing, but that is much broader, and brochures price increases and tough penalties for selling

tobacco to children.

Up to now there is little evidence that special targeting for our communities has been a part of those conversations.

"It's pretty much a white male group that put the settlement together and the document reflects that," said Congressman Bennie Thompson, who heads the Congressional Black Caucus tobacco task force.

Clearly, communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by marketing and by smoking-related diseases. And clearly, we must protect our children so that this cycle will end.

But, we must also protect minority-owned businesses which will be impacted by anti-smoking agreements. The tobacco industry is the largest single advertiser in African-American newspapers, according to Dorothy Leavell, president of the National Newspaper Publishers Association.

For the sake of the health of our children, we must say enough is enough. For the sake of our future, we must take action now.

Fair housing is still a hurdle for minorities

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Thirty years ago, the Fair Housing Act was passed into law. The legislation was supposed to allow people to live anywhere they wanted. For some time, it gave them opportunity to emulate "the Jeffersons" by "movin' on up."

For others, however, the barriers against open housing remain insurmountable.

Based on a report released by the National Fair Housing Alliance, the number of fair housing complaints would appear to be on the decline, but, according to Shanna Smith, executive director of the alliance, the low number of cases reported doesn't reflect reality.

"In 1997, only 24,000 complaints of housing discrimination were filed with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, state agencies or private fair housing groups," she said. "In fact, HUD estimates that more than 2 million instances of housing discrimination in rental, sales, lending and property insurance occur every year. The sad commentary is that things really haven't changed in our country. People either don't recognize discrimination, they don't have confidence in the system to record it, or they don't know where to go to report it when it happens."

There was a time in the not-so-distant past when realtors and bankers would refuse to do business with people of color. Discrimination still exists, but is presented differently.

Smith said today's discrimination runs the gamut from subtle to blatant.

"We don't find it as frequently that they say 'we won't rent to you because you're Black.' Although that still happens, what we find more often is discouragement or delay.

"For instance, if you're looking for an apartment they will say, 'When do you need it?' The realtor will then give you a time a month or two later than you requested. Or if it's a loan, you will be asked to bring back the same information over and over again.

"Perhaps," Smith continued, "the most sinister face of housing discrimination is worn by the insurance companies that write homeowners' policies. The agent will write inferior coverage which isn't enough to protect your investment. Most of us don't know it

because we don't read our policies. We don't know what we should be covered for. These insurance companies intentionally write inferior coverage in African-American, Hispanic and integrated neighborhoods."

The House of Representatives is set to pass bill HR 3206, the Fair Housing Act Amendment of 1998. These days, bills that carry titles like that usually work to the detriment of many. This bill is no exception.

The legislation would make it difficult, if not impossible, for group homes to be located in communities. Under this umbrella are homes that cater to those with disabilities including drug or alcohol addiction. It would also eliminate so-called free speech issues.

"Right now, if a person should call another person a name and say that 'I don't rent to Blacks', we could bring legal action under the Fair Housing Act. This legislation says that if it's their opinion that you as a Black person may not feel comfortable living here, they are allowed to say that. Even if you indicate that you feel discouraged, they can say that they are just offering their opinion."

Critics of the bill say it's a huge step backwards.

Their concerns are falling on deaf ears: the bill is sailing through the House with no hearings or real debate.

Unless those who might be affected make their voices heard, this legislation could become law in the "middle of the night" when no one is looking.

The right to shelter should be a given. For those who say that things are getting better, think about the testimony of Shawn Walton who lives in the Riviera Oaks apartment complex in New Orleans, La.

Walton described her living situation: "It has a Black and White side. It has all Black people on one side, and all White people on the other side. Each side had its own pool. Management controlled the heating and cooling on the 'Black' side. On the other side, the individuals controlled their own heat and air."

Those who say that the nation is colorblind need to look again and admit that "the more things change, the more they remain the same."

George Wilson works for the American Urban Radio Network.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

Americans the real losers in Jones-Clinton debacle

Special to Sentinel-Voice

I watched a tearful Paula Corbin Jones tell the nation that she will appeal Judge Susan Webber Wright's summary judgment that her sexual harassment lawsuit against President Clinton is without merit.

I felt doubly sorry — once for Jones and once for the nation.

I languished for Jones, not because I believed she was still weeping from Clinton's alleged sexual proposition of 1991, or because I believed all of her story of an Arkansas hotel room encounter, which she has embellished and changed a lot over the last five years.

Up front, as usual, was Susan Carpenter-McMillan, her "spokesperson," who would spend the rest of the day hopping from one television show to another. Carpenter-McMillan has become the great conservative celebrity, throwing out charges against Clinton whose truthfulness she can't possibly know. For every Jones tear she seems to smirk in pleasure.

Asked how Paula and her recently fired husband and two children live, Susan assured us that it is not off money sent in by donors to Jones's legal fund. Paula, she says, has gotten only a new hairdo and a suit to wear to court appearances from these donations.

Well, that's a damn shame. The least the people exploiting her case could do is see that the Joneses live at a decent level because they aren't going to gain anything else.



CARL ROWAN

Still, I feel sorrier for the country than for Paula — and not just because more people will suffer because Jones is exercising her right to appeal.

Just before her announcement, independent counsel Kenneth Starr went on TV to tell us that "the end is not yet in sight" to his investigation

of possible criminal acts by President Clinton.

In fact, he said, his probe apparently will go on for so long that he feels compelled to give up his chance to become the dean of law and of public policy at Pepperdine University in California.

This means that from now until January 2001, this country is not likely to know a day when its president is not under the threat of criminal prosecution by Starr and suffering the mental woes of Paula Jones's charges.

President Clinton puts on a brave face by saying he "won't let them distract or deter me" from doing the nation's business. But no human being could fail to be handicapped in these circumstances. This president has to be disheartened — and at times humiliated — when in Chile now or anyplace else later. To the extent that he is weakened, we are all the victims.

But I guess that is simply the price we pay for living in a society where one woman with a terribly weak case is free to seek what she regards as justice, and the political opposition is free to move recklessly to try to overthrow a president it despises.