



## WILL COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT & COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

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### REALITY ILLINOIS, COMMUNITY COALITION CLEAN UP WILMINGTON PARK, RESIDENTS DESIRE SMOKE-FREE PARKS POLICY

**JOLIET** — Tobacco litter is a growing problem across America, but Wilmington area residents are anxious to make their community cleaner and healthier.

Nearly three dozen area residents participated in a tobacco litter clean up April 30, at Wilmington's North Crest Park. The Will County Health Department's Reality Illinois teen group and Wilmington's Coalition for a Healthier Community sponsored the event, which also featured participants from Wilmington Girl Scout Troop 70329 and several other community activists. The group picked up more than 600 cigarette and cigar butts, plus a variety of other litter, in just one hour.

Tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United States and butts produced by smoking represent the most common form of litter. Fortunately, Wilmington residents are aware of the local littering problem, and committed to do something about it.

Will County Tobacco Control and Prevention, an award-winning initiative administered by the Health Department's Division of Family Health Services, has been working with the Wilmington Coalition for a healthier Community to promote anti-tobacco education, smoking cessation, and the need for tobacco-free policies in outdoor public places.

Community surveys distributed by the Health Department confirm that Wilmington residents embrace the anti-tobacco message. Nearly 80 percent of residents surveyed said tobacco litter was a serious community problem. Nearly 75 percent of survey participants support the development of tobacco-free policies for parks, playgrounds, skate parks, hiking trails, and outdoor events. Some 76 percent of survey participants believe all youth sporting events should be smoke-free.

Nearly 500 municipalities from across the U.S. have already banned smoking in their parks, playgrounds, and a variety of other venues. New Lenox is the only Will County municipality with a smoke-free parks policy to date, but momentum is building for a similar policy at Wilmington outdoor facilities.

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“Several trillion cigarette butts are discarded in the U.S. each year,” according to Will County Health Educator Jenny Blair, who oversees the Health Department’s youth tobacco prevention initiatives. “Those butts comprise 38 percent of the litter on roadways. Most smokers toss their cigarettes to the ground without realizing the impact their littering has on the environment.”

Tobacco litter is unsightly, costly to clean up, and dangerous to wildlife and ecosystems. Cigarette filters are made from plastic and require years to break down. They leach toxins into the soil and are typically carried into public waterways during floods and-or storms.

“Cigarette butts pose significant risks to natural water supplies and the nearby wildlife,” Blair explained. “Kids are also very susceptible to risks generated by tobacco litter. Young children can ingest butts they find on the ground or in sandboxes. Fortunately, there are available solutions.”

Blair sees ongoing community education as a key to promoting the anti-tobacco message. She is involved in a variety of anti-tobacco youth initiatives including: Reality Illinois, Teens Against Tobacco Use, and Tar Wars.

A statewide initiative, Reality Illinois encourages teens to take a stand against tobacco use by educating their peers, and communities about the adverse health effects and deceptive marketing practices of tobacco companies. Will County’s Reality Illinois program encompasses students from nine area high schools, including Wilmington and Peotone.

For more information about Will County Tobacco Control and Prevention, telephone 815-774-7312. For information about the Wilmington Coalition for a Healthier Community, visit [www.wilmington-coalition.org](http://www.wilmington-coalition.org).