

Dear Editor,

It is a sad statistic that 470 Arkansans die each year from exposure to secondhand smoke. This statistic is especially disheartening because the deaths are preventable. Children are particularly vulnerable to the dangerous health effects of secondhand smoke because their respiratory, immune and nervous systems are still developing. I'm glad to see Arkansas has made an important step to decrease deaths and illnesses related to smoking by increasing the number of children protected from secondhand smoke in cars.

Governor Mike Beebe signed Act 811 of 2011 into law on March 30, and the law takes effect July 27. The new law amends the Arkansas Protection from Secondhand Smoke for Children Act of 2006, which protected children under 6 and weighing less than 60 pounds from secondhand smoke while in vehicles. Now applying to children under 14, the new law will protect 78 percent of Arkansas children – a vast improvement from the 2006 law's 34 percent.

Children exposed to secondhand smoke are at an increased risk for sudden infant death syndrome, lower respiratory infections, middle ear disease, more severe asthma and slowed lung growth. Cigarette smoke contains hundreds of toxic chemicals – at least 69 of which cause cancer, and even with open windows, smoke can stay trapped in a car, exposing children to high levels of particulate pollution. In a short time, pollution levels from a single burning cigarette can build to a hazard level equivalent to the vicinity of an outdoor forest fire. According to the 2008 Adult Tobacco Survey, 73 percent of Arkansas adults would support an even stronger law that protects all children under 18 from exposure to secondhand smoke in vehicles.

For more information, call the Arkansas Tobacco Prevention and Cessation Program at (501) 661-2953, or to quit smoking call the Arkansas Tobacco Quitline at 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

It takes legislators, law enforcement and public health advocates working together to make policy changes that will reduce healthcare costs and deaths related to smoking. Strengthening Arkansas laws to protect children from secondhand smoke in vehicles is a good step in the right direction. Let's continue to improve our laws to protect more people from secondhand smoke.

Sincerely,

[Name]
[Title]
[Organization]