



## The Southern Neighbors Collaborative

### Every State Is Its Own Front

In America's battle to curb tobacco use, every state is its own "front," and probably the fiercest battles are being fought in the American southeast. In states such as Virginia, North Carolina and Kentucky, tobacco has been a cash crop for centuries, and the resulting influence on local policy can be clearly measured. As of 2002, across the United States, the average state excise tax on a pack of cigarettes was 61.1 cents. In tobacco states, it was 8.5 cents ([Center for Tobacco Free Kids](#)).

In the fall of 2002, however, several factors converged that may ultimately end this wide disparity. First, a prolonged economic downturn compelled state governments to look everywhere for new or stronger sources of revenue. Second, studies across the United States were showing conclusively that when cigarette taxes went up, smoking rates went down. And third, health advocates along with tobacco prevention and education professionals in several southern states decided to stop talking about working together and finally do it.

"So we sent a memo to Dearell ([TTAC](#) director Dearell Niemeyer), recalls Amy Barkley of the [Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids](#) in Kentucky. Barkley and her colleagues knew TTAC's executive director from his 25 years of experience on "tobacco road" and they wanted his guidance in coordinating a true group effort. "And he was Johnny-on-the-spot," says Barkley. "He asked, 'What do you need to make this happen?'" Given the group's needs for coordination, fundraising help and the know-how to effect policy change, Dearell brought in Madeleine Solomon, a TTAC consultant who specializes in coalition capacity-building.

In November 2002, Solomon organized a meeting in Durham, N.C, with 40 representatives from seven states: Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. The group agreed to cooperate as the "Southern Neighbors Collaborative" and to collectively:

- Pursue increases in state excise taxes to at least the national average.
- Develop common messages, share research, track legislative processes and generally share information as much as possible.

- Undertake a study of the economic impact of cross border sales (the cost of which would be covered by TTAC).
- Conduct regional media advocacy campaigns.
- Apply for grants that would enable them to continue to work collectively with a full-time coordinator and additional infrastructure.

With proposals drafted by Solomon, the newly formed collaborative applied for and won grants totaling \$500,000 and also received more than \$800,000 of in-kind contributions from state and national partners.

TTAC also provided the collaborative with funding for the services an [American Lung Association](#) policy analyst.

In March 2003, the collaborative scored its first major victory: the West Virginia legislature passed an increase in cigarette taxes from 17 cents to 55 cents per pack. "TTAC is the antithesis of an ivory tower think-tank," says Barkley. "They are creative and flexible—an invaluable resource. This wouldn't have happened without them."