



Group To Alleviate Smoking Pollution



Spying on Foes of Smoking

Philip Morris files detail tobacco industry's opposition

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There's a surprising saga from files of the powerful tobacco industry.

A pro-tobacco informant apparently infiltrated a meeting of health activists in Colorado six years ago to monitor their efforts to start the local arm of a federal anti-smoking program. A report by the informant, found in Philip Morris Cos. Inc. files, provides a portrait of an amateurish undercover attempt.

"I arrived after the meeting commenced and despite my effort to remain invisible, ended up seated at the head of the table," the anonymous author wrote in a memo dated Dec. 9, 1992.

"I signed in as a student and hoped that my baggy clothes and backpack would make this credible," the memo said about the meeting in Fort Collins, a college town. "The 'close quarters' inhibited my notetaking somewhat."

The snoop obtained literature from the meeting and told about activists discussing "guerilla [sic] tactics" to use in fighting "the enemy" as well as anti-smoking ordinances and tax initiatives, according to the memo.

"Would advise future 'plants' to arrive late and leave early, avoiding the awkward small talk with other attendees that might create suspicion," the author wrote.

In 1991, the National Cancer Institute and American Cancer Society launched in Colorado, Virginia and 15 other states the unusual program that was discussed at the Fort Collins meeting. It's called American Stop Smoking Intervention Study and is aimed at snuffing out smoking through community-based coalitions.

ASSIST got off the ground long before Congress considered more restrictive and sweeping measures to fight youth smoking and before the tobacco industry mounted a \$40 million advertising campaign against legislation in the Senate. That bill was jettisoned last month.

Officials with ASSIST have been forced to defend their program against attacks from the tobacco industry and its allies. The officials say the attacks have diverted valuable time and resources.

In some ASSIST states, critics have submitted freedom-of-information request for documents and placed formal charges against anti-smoking groups and health officials, alleging the improper use of public money to lobby. But ASSIST officials say they have spelled out that federal money must not be spent improperly.

Now, documents from Philip Morris files posted on the Internet have offered new information about the industry's opposition.

A January 1992 Philip Morris memo offered a six-point plan to thwart ASSIST. Tactics included congressional investigation, legal challenges, use of sympathetic health advocacy groups, and anti-tax groups.

"I believe that these are the most effective means of disrupting ASSIST," the author wrote.

Marc W. Manley, chief of tobacco control research for the National Cancer Institute, reacted angrily to the disclosures.

"Looking at those memos, it seems to me the Philip Morris company deliberately disrupted a major cancer prevention research program," he said.

"We had evidence that Philip Morris was leading legal attacks on several ASSIST states as the project has gone along. Now we have the document that planned many of those attacks," he said.

Jerie Jordan, ASSIST manager for the American Cancer Society, criticized people who she said tried to thwart the program.

"It's scary to think of," Jordan said. "While in the early '90s Philip Morris sponsored the Bill of Rights tour around the country -- and there they are coming into little citizens\' groups, taking notes."

Brendan McCormick, a spokesman for the company's tobacco-manufacturing arm, Philip Morris USA, declined to discuss the memos. He said his company wanted to find out more about whether local ASSIST groups misspent taxpayer money.

"Our primary concern about the ASSIST program was what appeared to be an improper use of federal funds to support lobbying activities at the state and local level," McCormick said.

ASSIST has been allotted about \$160 million by the federal government and is funded through fall 1999. It has reported reducing cigarette consumption in the 17 states by 7 percent. Congress is considering expanding it to all states.

One document from the Philip Morris files described ASSIST as posing a serious threat. (Philip Morris and three other tobacco companies posted hundreds of thousands of internal documents on the Internet in February to help promote a national tobacco settlement.)

"ASSIST will hit us in our most vulnerable areas -- in the localities and in the private workplace," the document said.

"It has the potential to peel away from the industry many of its historic allies.

"For example, major employers in many states are members of the ASSIST coalition. Also, chambers of commerce, labor unions, groups like the Urban League and NAACP."

The document, not on a company letterhead, expressed concern that ASSIST would aid "creation of an anti-smoking infrastructure, right down to the local level."

In Colorado, meanwhile, a local health official who attended the Fort Collins meeting wondered aloud recently why it was subject to intelligence-gathering.

Perhaps it was because the local anti-smoking coalition was the most active one in the state then, said Ann Watson of the Larimer County health and environment department. Watson said the meeting was open to the public.

Colorado later became a battleground in the tobacco wars. A referendum in 1994 to increase cigarette taxes was fought vigorously by the tobacco industry and was defeated.

The person who monitored the Fort Collins meeting felt conspicuous after a speaker alleged "sleazy, low-life" tactics by the tobacco industry to counter anti-smoking efforts, and after someone suggested sending a spy to a smokers' rights group event, according to the memo.

"I waited until the group moved on to a more benign topic so as not to seem abrupt, looked conspicuously at my watch and left."

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