

Oregon lawmakers consider raising tobacco sales age to 21

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(KPTV)
SALEM, OR (KPTV) -

Lawmakers and advocates who support raising the tobacco sales age from 18 to 21 met in Salem Wednesday in support of new legislation.

Backed by Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward (D-Beaverton), the bill would raise the sales age on all tobacco products across the state to 21.



Hawaii and California have recently passed similar laws, and now advocates are hoping Oregon will be the third state in the nation to do so.

“Most smoking starts in your younger years, so we know that 90 percent of smokers start before the age of 21,” said advocate Eric Brodell with Tobacco 21 and the Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation. “If we can get tobacco products out of our high schools by distancing the social circles tobacco is in, we have a much better chance of decreasing the chronic effects of tobacco products on our youth and the rest of our citizens.”

Dr. Brian Drecker, the director of the OHSU Knight Cancer Institute, was also on hand in Salem Wednesday.

“This bill will decrease the number of people that start smoking in our state by about 20 percent and that translates to 1,000 lives saved per year,” Dr. Drecker said.

Even a high school senior impacted by tobacco use spoke in support of the bill.

“One of my best friends, he became addicted to tobacco when he was 15,” said Mason Thurman. “His older cousin gave it to him on a whim because he wanted him to try tobacco. Each day his dependency on tobacco just increases.”

Thurman said their relationship is now strained because he’s continually pressured to buy tobacco products for his younger friends.

According to a poll from the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, 64 percent of Oregonians support raising the tobacco age to 21.

Researchers say roughly 1,800 kids become new daily smokers in Oregon every year, and tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death in the state accounting for more than a quarter of all cancers in Oregon.

“Everybody understands this is a public health issue,” Sen. Steiner Hayward said. “This is about making Oregon the healthiest state in the nation.”

The bill is expected to be officially introduced in the Oregon Senate before the end of the week.

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