

Bill would make Rhode Island 1st state to raise legal age for purchasing tobacco to 21

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Rhode Island would become the first state in the country to raise the minimum age for purchasing tobacco products to 21, under proposed legislation.

State Rep. Teresa Tanzi (D-South Kingstown, Narragansett) said she introduced the bill ([H-5225](#)) because she believes the state needs to send a stronger anti-smoking message to youths and to promote public health. The legal age is now 18.

“Nicotine addiction is tough to break, and most smokers get hooked at a young age. My hope is that making it harder for younger people to get cigarettes would have the effect of preventing smokers from starting in the first place, and there is ample evidence to support this,” Tanzi said in a statement. “The bottom line is public policy can create better health outcomes for more Rhode Islanders, and when the science is this strong in support of a change in policy, it would be irresponsible not to act.”

A State House press release mentions a statistic from the American Lung Association that says the average age of daily smoking initiation for new smokers in 2008 was 20.1 years among those 12 to 49 years old. The association also says people who begin smoking at an early age are more likely to develop a severe addiction to nicotine.

New Jersey, Alaska, Alabama and Utah are among states that have made 19 the minimum age for tobacco purchases. Some municipalities have made 21 the legal age, including 15 towns in neighboring Massachusetts. New York City banned sales to those younger than 21 last year.

The legislation is cosponsored by Rep. Mia Ackerman (D-Cumberland, Lincoln), Rep. Arthur Handy (D-Cranston), Rep. John J. Lombardi (D-Providence) and Rep. Shelby Maldonado (D-Central Falls).

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