

# Raising legal age to 21 is the best way for KC area cities to combat teen smoking

The Editorial Board

The best way to reduce tobacco use is to target teenagers so they don't start smoking and become addicted as adults. That's the aim of a new civic smoking-cessation initiative, Tobacco 21|KC.

The worthy project, announced Thursday, aims to get area cities to raise the minimum legal age for tobacco product purchases from 18 to 21. It already has the support of more than 100 businesses, health care organizations, children's advocacy groups, educators and community groups.

That's not surprising. The promoting organization, Healthy KC, is a partnership of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City working to improve the health and well-being of area residents. Its four pillars are nutrition, physical activity, work/life integration and tobacco cessation.

Raising the legal age to 21 for tobacco purchases, including e-cigarettes, actually attacks smoking among 14- to 15-year-olds, because the younger teens mostly depend on their older friends to buy cigarettes for them. One study, by the Institute of Medicine on behalf of the Food and Drug Administration, predicts that raising the age limit would lead to fewer long-term smokers and reduce overall smoking rates by about 12 percent.

A drop like that and an expected 25 percent decline in youth smoking initiation would be good for the health of Kansas Citians. Right now 23.1 percent of Missouri's high school students and 24.1 percent of students in Kansas high schools are tobacco users compared with 22.4 percent nationwide. About 90 percent of adult smokers start before age 18.

[Tobacco 21](#) was started in 1996 as a national effort. Needham, Mass., became the first city to act, in 2005, and has reported that teen smoking declined 46 percent between 2006 and 2010. Hawaii, New York City and more than 90 other cities in the U.S. have passed Tobacco 21 measures.

"We're excited about it," Jim Heeter, president and chief executive with the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, told the editorial board of The Star. "We feel it will have an enormous impact."

Raising the age for tobacco purchases is supported by 75 percent of adults in the United States and even 70 percent of smokers. Smokers are at a [greater risk](#) of stroke, heart disease and cancer. Smoking causes more than 480,000 deaths annually in the U.S. Most people who smoke say they wish someone had prevented them from starting when they were young.

Officials in several area cities have expressed an interest in passing Tobacco21|KC ordinances. Once the first goes on the books, chamber officials said, other cities would follow. The initiative would dovetail with smoking bans approved in recent years by area cities and the state of Kansas, which have created healthier workplaces for employees and customers of restaurants, bars and other companies.

If what has occurred elsewhere happens in the Kansas City area, Tobacco 21|KC is expected to decrease annual tobacco sales only by 2 percent but result in millions of dollars saved in health care expenses from people not smoking.

The initiative is the right thing to do to ensure Kansas City area residents live longer, healthier lives.

