

Opinion: Support bill to reduce tobacco use

guampdn.com/story/opinion/2016/07/06/opinion-support-bill-reduce-tobacco-use/86740056/

(Photo: Rick Cruz/PDN)

Editor's note: The following letter was sent to senators in the 33rd Guam Legislature.

As the president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, I urge you to support Bill 141-33, the Youth Protection Act of 2015, to reduce tobacco use, particularly among youth and young adults. The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids is the nation's largest nonprofit, non-governmental advocacy organization solely devoted to reducing tobacco use and its deadly toll by advocating for public policies that prevent kids from smoking, help smokers quit and protect everyone from secondhand smoke.



Tobacco remains this nation's No. 1 preventable cause of premature death and disease, killing more than 480,000 Americans annually. Guam has one of the highest youth smoking rates among U.S. states and territories. Because tobacco is so harmful, we should do everything we can to prevent its use among young people.

Raising the legal age for the sale of tobacco products, including electronic cigarettes, to 21 will help reduce tobacco use and save lives. In 2015, the Institute of Medicine, one of the most prestigious scientific authorities in the United States, issued a comprehensive report concluding that raising the tobacco sale age to 21 will:



- significantly reduce the number of adolescents and young adults who start smoking;
- reduce smoking-caused deaths; and
- immediately improve the health of adolescents, young adults and young mothers who would be deterred from smoking, as well as their children.

Raising the tobacco sale age to 21 is critically important given that about 95 percent of adult smokers begin smoking before they turn 21.3. The ages of 18 to 21 are a critical period, when many smokers move from experimental smoking to regular, daily use and many high school teenagers access tobacco through high school social networks that include 18-year-olds. Moving the age up to 21 will help reduce tobacco use by 18- to 20-year-olds and will help protect younger teens by keeping tobacco out of high schools.

Tobacco companies target young people before they can fully appreciate the consequences of becoming addicted to the nicotine in tobacco. Experimentation or initiation of tobacco use during adolescence and young adulthood is particularly troubling because adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the addictive effects of nicotine. Once a person is addicted to nicotine, it is difficult to stop, and the health consequences begin immediately and accumulate over a lifetime.

It is critical to raise the sale age to 21 for electronic cigarettes, which include a new way to deliver the addictive substance nicotine. Using electronic cigarettes may expose the developing adolescent brain to nicotine and other potentially harmful substances.

Further, e-cigarette manufacturers have used the same themes and tactics used by tobacco companies for decades to attract kids to smoking. E-cigarettes and refill liquids are available in an assortment of flavors with obvious youth appeal, such as gummy bear, cotton candy and fruit punch.

Given these marketing practices, not surprisingly, there has been a rapid increase in youth use of e-cigarettes. Data released by the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration show that since 2011 there has been a tenfold increase in youths' use of electronic cigarettes. In Guam, approximately 60 percent of high school students have ever used electronic vapor products, and roughly 30 percent are current users, a higher rate than cigarettes.

Assuring that the definition of tobacco products includes e-cigarettes is a simple and effective way to assure that e-cigarettes are subject to the same sales restrictions generally applied to other tobacco products, now and in the future.

If Guam adopts a tobacco sale age of 21, it will join California, Hawaii and at least 155 localities in 11 states, including New York City, that have enacted the provision.

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids gives our full support to Bill 141-33, the Youth Protection Act of 2015.

Matthew L. Myers is president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

