

POINT OF VIEW It is time for 21

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It is time to raise the legal age for tobacco products from 18 to 21. Increasing the access age for all nicotine and tobacco products is the most promising strategy to prevent lifelong addiction among our youth. Numerous studies have shown that high school use of tobacco is cut in half where the legal age has been raised to 21.

According to an exhaustive study by the Institute of Medicine, increasing the tobacco access age to 21 would result in 249,000 fewer premature deaths related to cigarette smoking. It also would result in 286,000 fewer pre-term births and 438,000 fewer babies born with low weights.

Those who oppose this policy argue that if a person is old enough to fight for their country, they should be allowed to smoke. Admirals and generals disagree. Rear Adm. John Fuller wrote, "If someone is young enough to fight for their country, they should be free from addiction to a deadly drug."

The military recognizes that smoking seriously impairs combat readiness, and the high cost associated with caring for addicted smokers detracts from our national defense. The Department of Defense estimates 175,000 current active duty service members will die from using tobacco products unless they quit. Tobacco use among active duty military reduces soldiers' fitness and endurance, and is linked to higher rates of absenteeism and lost productivity. Soldiers who use tobacco are more likely to sustain injuries, suffer increased surgical complications and experience delayed wound healing.

Retailers will argue they will lose business. This is a false argument because Target, Whole Foods, CVS and other retailers have stopped selling tobacco products and it has not hurt their business.

When the alcohol age was raised to 21, it saved 1,000 lives a year on the highways, and dropped teenage drinking by more than a third.

Opponents may argue that raising the legal age to 21 is unpopular, but they ignore the polling data. In a statewide poll of likely voters, conducted last year, 69 percent favored raising the legal age to 21 if it were a ballot initiative. This overwhelming popular support is consistent with numerous other polls conducted across the United States.

Opponents may argue that the state will lose tobacco tax revenue. It will, but Florida pays out more than twice the money it collects in tobacco tax to pay Medicaid claims due to tobacco-related illnesses.

Raising the legal age benefits the state budget.

For the health of our citizens, our troops, our businesses and, most important of all, for our future generations, Florida needs to enact healthy laws to protect young people. If the state Legislature will not act, then cities and counties should.

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Editor's note: John Michael Pierobon is chairman of the Education and Advocacy Committee of the Tobacco-Free Partnership of Broward County.