

ALA seeks to raise legal buying age through 'Tobacco 21'

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CHICAGO – The American Lung Association on Tuesday launched "Tobacco 21," an initiative calling on the remaining 48 states and the District of Columbia to follow the lead of California and Hawaii, and raise the legal sales age for tobacco products to 21.

"Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable illness and death in the United States, and most adult smokers began smoking before they turned 21," stated Harold Wimmer, national president and CEO of the American Lung Association. "The American Lung Association strongly supports raising the minimum sales age for all tobacco products to 21 to reduce youth smoking, prevent a future generation of tobacco users and save thousands of lives every year."

In June of 2015, Hawaii passed a bill making it the first state to raise its minimum sales age for tobacco products to 21. California followed suit in May of 2016. In addition, 180 cities and communities in 14 different states have local Tobacco 21 laws in effect as of August 2016, including New York, Boston and Chicago.

"Hawaii and California set the example for the rest of the country earlier this year. Now we're calling on all states to take action to protect young people from a life of tobacco addiction, poor health and early death," Wimmer said.

In 2015, the National Academy of Medicine, formerly the Institute of Medicine, released a report that found that increasing the minimum age of sale for tobacco products to at least 21 years old would significantly reduce youth tobacco use. Specifically, NAM predicts that smoking will be reduced by 25% among those 15-17 years old and 15% among those 18-20 years old if the tobacco sales age is increased to 21. This could prevent 223,000 deaths among people born between 2000 and 2019, including 50,000 fewer dying from lung cancer, one of the nation's leading cancer killers.

From the ages of 18 to 21, many smokers transition from experimenting to regular use. The majority of adult smokers begin smoking before they turn 21. Younger kids often rely on older classmates, aged 18 and 19, to supply them with tobacco products. Since few students reach 21 while still in high school, raising the minimum sales age to 21 virtually eliminates high school students from being able to buy tobacco, and helps break the peer supply chain to many of these younger smokers.

"Increasing the sales age for tobacco products will also help counter the tobacco industry's efforts to target young people at a critical time when many move from experimenting with tobacco to regular smoking," said Wimmer.

Marketing to young people is a long-used tactic of the tobacco industry to increase sales, as illustrated by a 1981 document from the tobacco company RJ Reynolds, which analyzed data from the National Bureau of Economic Research, and reads: "If a man has never smoked by age 18, the odds are three-to-one that he never will. By age 21, the odds are twenty-to-one."

"The most effective way to protect our kids from the terrible toll of tobacco use is to make sure they never start smoking in the first place," Wimmer said. "More than 4,700 young people under 21 try their first cigarette every day, and 1,400 of them become regular daily smokers. One-third to one-half of these kids will die from smoking-related diseases. 'Tobacco 21' can help break this cycle of death and disease."