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Local doctor tests Tobacco 21 enforcement; says 9 stores sold to underage teen

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FRANKLIN COUNTY, Ohio

A local doctor took research into his own hands when asking the Franklin County Board of Health to enforce city ordinance Tobacco 21.

"I don't like surprising people like this, but I had to get their attention," said Dr. Rob Crane, a family medicine physician for Ohio State. "I came to the same board meeting and made a presentation, down on one knee begging for their help and they ignored me."

Tobacco 21 makes the legal age to purchase tobacco products 21 years of age in Bexley, Upper Arlington, New Albany, Grandview and Dublin.

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"In those five cities there is no real enforcement because the Franklin County Health Department hasn't stood up to do it," said Dr. Crane.

Crane says he's spent the last 16 months asking the Department to run youth-based stings as a way to see if retailers are following the law.

"They don't want to be involved in stings. I've told them, this is not James Bond," he said. So, Crane worked with Christal Welch, a 19-year-old college student to see how many stores would sell to her.

Of the 18 stores they went to in the central Ohio area, nine sold to her overlooking her age or not checking ID.

"I was shocked," Welch said. "Half the time they would ask 'are you old enough?', and I would say yes, but they didn't ask for my ID. Other times, they would look at my ID that says I'll be 21 in 2019, and they still sold it to me."

Tuesday, Welch and Dr. Crane presented their findings to the Franklin County Board of Health.

"I think his goal is also our goal," said Health Commissioner Joe Mazzola. "For us right now we don't have a direct role in the enforcement procedures for most of the cities that have passed Tobacco 21 in our jurisdiction. But, certainly, we are looking to work with more local communities as they consider raising the age from 18-21."

Mazzola says the department has spent time researching enforcement tactics to ensure they make an informed decision.

"What we've been doing is looking at around the state of Ohio, looking around the nation really for best practices and information about the effectiveness for local health departments to do active enforcement for tobacco 21 ordinances and so that takes time," said Mazzola.

Mazzola says the commission will make a formal recommendation to the Franklin County Board of Health over the next couple months.

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