

# E-cigarettes use among youth at epidemic levels

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John Michael Pierobon is a member of the Tobacco-Free Partnership of Broward County. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

According to the FDA, the use of electronic cigarettes among high school students nationwide is up 78 percent in the past year.

The latest Florida Youth Tobacco Survey, which tracks indicators of tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke among middle and high school students, shows that one in four high school students currently use electronic vaping. Florida is significantly above the national average.

People do not become addicted to tobacco or to cigarettes. They become addicted to nicotine, which is in tobacco and in electronic cigarettes. Nicotine is an insecticide, and is highly addictive.

Today there are significantly more children inhaling nicotine than 20 years ago. Nicotine adversely affects the brains of children, which are not fully developed. Nicotine addiction leads to a costly, slow and painful death. It kills 480,000 Americans each year.

Any assumption that vaping is safer than smoking has been dispelled by many studies including one at the University of Miami School of Medicine. Vaping is not safe, and there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke.

Even the tobacco companies know this. They also know electronic cigarettes are needed to maintain high rates of nicotine addiction in the future.

The Surgeon General recently declared "e-cigarette use among youth an epidemic."

Today's vaping epidemic is similar to the polio epidemic of the last century. There is no cure for polio, it can only be prevented. There is no cure for drug addiction, it can only be prevented. Nicotine addiction is mostly a pediatric disease.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt suffered from two crippling diseases; polio and nicotine addiction. Polio kept him from walking, but it is what nicotine did to his cardiovascular system that killed him.

The March of Dimes, founded by President Roosevelt, funded research for the polio vaccine which effectively eradicated polio in the western hemisphere. Governments have mandated that children must be vaccinated before entering school. When governments want to eradicate a disease, they can do so.

Legislators in Florida (state and local) have done nothing to stop the vaping epidemic, but they can do many things. For example, the state legislature can define electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), which includes electronic cigarettes, as tobacco.

Currently, vape shops in Florida are unregulated and do not require a license to sell ENDS. Requiring vape shops to have licenses to operate and taxing ENDS as cigarettes are taxed will be more popular than raising property taxes.

Since 2016 six states have raised the legal age to purchase tobacco to 21, and so have 370 cities and counties across America. None are in Florida.

The Florida Legislature and local governments must raise the legal age to purchase tobacco to 21. Nearly all tobacco product use, and addiction, begins during youth and young adulthood. Tobacco use among teenagers has been cut in half in communities where the legal age is now 21.

Raising the access age to 21 would be beneficial to elected officials as it is an extremely popular measure. In a statewide poll of likely voters, 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 America.

Opponents may argue the state will lose tobacco tax revenue. This argument lacks vision because Florida pays out more than twice the money it collects in tobacco tax to pay for Medicaid claims due to tobacco-related illnesses and does not account for the immeasurable human suffering caused by drug addiction.

Healthy laws need to be enacted to protect young people from this deadly epidemic. If the state legislature will not act, then cities and counties must act to end the ENDS epidemic.

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