

# Tobacco 21 wins passage in Senate, heads to governor for signing

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by Jenna Carlesso and Maya Moore

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Connecticut is poised to raise the legal age to purchase tobacco products from 18 to 21 with an overwhelming vote Friday in the state Senate endorsing the bill.

The measure won passage in the House earlier this month and now heads to Gov. Ned Lamont, who has pledged to sign it. The law would take effect in October.

The Senate voted 33-3 in favor of the proposal, with three Republicans dissenting.



“Increasing the age of being able to purchase tobacco products ... is going to dramatically cut the number of young people who start smoking in our state,” said Sen. Mae Flexer, D-Killingly, a key backer of the measure. “It’s also going to dramatically cut the number of young people who start to use vaping products. As we’ve seen in recent years, those numbers are skyrocketing.”

Once signed into law, Connecticut will join 15 other states and hundreds of cities and towns that have passed similar legislation, including California, Maryland, Washington, Hawaii and most recently, New York.

This year, the State Board of Education released a report showing a six-fold increase in the number of suspensions and expulsions related to vaping over the prior year. The number of Connecticut high school students who used vaping products doubled from 2015 to 2017, according to a study released by the state Department of Public Health last fall. Overall, 14.7 percent of high school students reported “currently” vaping in 2017, compared to 7.2 percent in 2015.

Connecticut’s law would prohibit businesses from selling products such as cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco or pipe tobacco to people younger than 21. It also bans the sale of vaping products, which contain nicotine, to those under 21.

“Tobacco use in this country remains the leading cause of preventable deaths,” Flexer said. “Tobacco use kills more people in Connecticut each year than alcohol, AIDS, car crashes, illegal drugs, accidents, murders and suicides combined.”

Health advocates have praised the bill and said it mirrors legislation raising the age for purchase of tobacco products in eight Connecticut communities, including Hartford and Bridgeport.

The state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services would be responsible for conducting unannounced compliance checks on e-cigarette dealers and referring violators to the Department of Revenue Services, which could impose penalties.

Under the proposal, the department could levy fines of up to \$300 for a first offense; up to \$750 for a second violation; and up to \$1,000 for each subsequent offense. Fines for a second or subsequent violation apply within 24 months of the first offense.

The bill increases, from \$50 to \$200, the annual license fee for cigarette dealers. It also boosts the penalty for each day a cigarette dealer or distributor operates without a license to \$50, up from \$5.

Sen. Christine Cohen, who started smoking at age 14 and quit years later when she became pregnant, said lawmakers have “a responsibility to our youth.” The ordeal of kicking her cigarette habit was the toughest feat of her life, she said.

“It’s very hard to overcome,” Cohen said. “I’m hard pressed to think of another product on the market that has the known detrimental health risks and addictive qualities that tobacco has.”

Sen. Rob Sampson, R-Wolcott, one of the few legislators to oppose the measure, tried unsuccessfully to push through an amendment that would have exempted those serving in the military. Sampson, who took up smoking at age 13, said that if people are old enough to defend the country, they should be able to buy tobacco.

“I agree minors should be restricted from purchasing cigarettes, but the term is minors,” he said. “I don’t want to blur what we consider to be an adult and a minor in the policies we pass. It is dangerous to do so.”

Anti-smoking advocates hailed the adoption.