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Tobacco 21 bill to keep tobacco out of hands of youth

Media event scheduled Feb. 1 on the front steps of the Oregon Capitol

SALEM – Preventing tobacco use by young people is a proven method to prevent long-term addiction. That’s why the Tobacco 21 for Oregon coalition wants to raise the legal age for tobacco use to 21 in the state.

A media event – featuring Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward (D-Beaverton), Rep. Richard Vial (R-Scholls), Oregon Health & Science University Knight Cancer Institute Director Dr. Brian Druker, Valley Catholic High School student Mason Thurman and the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network – is scheduled for 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 1, on the front steps of the State Capitol in Salem.

"I am proud to continue working towards making Oregon the healthiest state in the nation by chief sponsoring Tobacco 21," Steiner Hayward said. "This bill will change the legal age of tobacco and inhalant delivery systems sales and consumption to 21, and will prevent life-long addiction and smoking-related health issues. This is good for individuals' well-being and good for our state overall."

The bill would raise the legal age of sale and consumption for all tobacco and inhalant delivery system products to 21. It’s part of a national Tobacco 21 movement with a goal of persuading state and local governments to adopt the new age parameter. Two other states have passed statewide laws on the issue and nearly 200 local governments across the country have adopted an older minimum age.

“Raising the tobacco sales age is a broadly supported issue. In fact, 64 percent of Oregonians say they favor raising the age for tobacco sales to 21 as part of the solution to addressing Oregon’s number one cause of preventable death,” said Christopher Friend, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network Oregon government relations director. “The Legislature has a tool at their fingertips that promises to save lives and money, and also has wide support across party lines.”

Tobacco use claims the lives of more than 5,500 Oregonians every year. According to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, roughly 1,800 Oregon teens younger than 18 become new daily smokers each year. Research from the United States Surgeon General indicates children and teens may be especially sensitive to nicotine, making it easier for them to become addicted, and even at lower levels of consumption than adults. The younger smokers are when they start, the more likely they are to become addicted.

Raising the tobacco sales age is predicted to have the biggest impact on smoking rates among 15- to 17-year-olds. Research shows that younger teens in high school often turn to their 18-year-old classmates as sources for tobacco products. If the minimum age is 21, it will become much more difficult for teenagers to obtain tobacco and, subsequently, develop nicotine addiction.

“If you can delay the start of a tobacco habit by even a few years, fewer young people will become addicted to tobacco, which means fewer cancer patients in the future,” Dr. Druker said. “The bottom line is that Tobacco 21 will save the lives of Oregonians.”

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