**It’s time Rhode Island raised the minimum tobacco sale age to 21**

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It has been encouraging to read about renewed efforts to increase the minimum legal age to 21 to purchase tobacco products in Rhode Island, as championed by state Representative Teresa Tanzi (D-Dist. 34 South Kingstown, Narragansett) and state Senator Cynthia Coyne (D- Dist. 32 Barrington, Bristol, East Providence). To date, Hawaii and California are the only states to enact such laws, while a growing number of municipalities throughout the country have done so. Just to the north of us, more than 140 municipalities in Massachusetts already carry the age 21 restriction. In 2016, at the federal level, a similar measure is supported by our U.S. Senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse.

There is irrefutable evidence propelling and compelling this movement at all levels of our government today to protect the health of our youth: Tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable death and disease, each year killing about 1,600 Rhode Islanders and 480,000 people throughout the United States. That is more than opioid and drug overdose deaths, car accidents, homicides, and HIV/AIDS-related deaths combined. Science and national data also tell us that: smoking disrupts healthy adolescent development; young people are the most susceptible to developing a nicotine addiction and getting hooked on cigarettes for life; 95 percent of adult smokers begin smoking before their 21st birthday; and every day across the U.S. another 2,100 young people go from occasional tobacco use to daily, habitual cigarette smoking when they are teens or young adults.

While our state has been a nationwide leader in tobacco control by achieving the lowest youth smoking rate, we are quickly losing ground as other forms of tobacco use (e.g. cigars, little cigars, flavored products, e-cigarettes, spit, Hookah, etc.) have become more prevalent among our state’s high school students and threaten to reinstate all tobacco use as a socially accepted norm, including cigarette smoking. Also troubling is that more than 28 percent of RI’s smoking youth report buying these products on their own in retail stores. In fact, this is the highest self-reported youth buy rate for cigarettes in the U.S. The state of RI needs to increase funding for youth compliance checks in order to curtail youth cigarette access.

A year ago, the prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM) published a new report on the predicted public health benefits that would result by increasing the tobacco sale age, based on experts’ careful evidence reviews of existing literature on tobacco use initiation, developmental biology and psy­chology, and existing increased minimum age tobacco policies. The expert panel also used mathematical modeling to quantify their predictions. Overall, the IOM concluded that increasing the sale age to 21 would significantly reduce the number of adolescents and young adults who start smoking; reduce smoking-caused deaths; and immediately improve the health of adolescents, young adults and young mothers who would be deterred from smoking, as well as their children.

Raising the legal minimum age to 21 on all tobacco products will help prevent or delay initiation of all forms of tobacco use by teens and young adults, the IOM concluded while noting, “…the largest proportionate reduction in initiation of tobacco use will likely occur among adolescents of ages 15 to 17 years…”

The IOM modeling further calculated that nationwide implementation of such 21+ tobacco sales policies would save 223,000 people from premature tobacco-related deaths by 2019 and result in 12% fewer smokers by the year 2100.

The evidence and message is clear—it’s time for Rhode Island to take this next step to protect today’s youth as well as our future generations from preventable tobacco-related death and disease by increasing the minimum legal age to 21 to purchase tobacco products.

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