

Ebel: Tobacco 21 policies deserve our support

Benjamin Lanka, Newark Advocate Published 9:34 a.m. ET June 2, 2019

The movement to raise the legal age to purchase tobacco and vaping products to 21-years-old is gaining momentum in Ohio and nationally. The Tobacco-21 policy has been around for a while, with 475 cities and counties, and 14 states, raising their tobacco purchase age from 18 to 21 in recent years.

In Ohio at least 22 local cities, including Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati, and one county, have passed Tobacco-21 ordinances. Currently, Licking County does not have any Tobacco-21 ordinances, although discussions have begun in both Newark and Granville.

Governor DeWine included a Tobacco-21 provision in his executive budget proposal. The policy was not included in the House budget version, and the Senate is currently drafting their budget proposal. If not addressed in the budget bill, the legislation may be introduced in a separate bill by proponents in the legislature. The U.S. Senate has introduced a national Tobacco-21 proposal as well.

Why the renewed focus on tobacco and vaping? With much of the public health news being tied to the opioid/drug epidemic in recent years, many people forget that Ohio has one of the highest smoking rates in the country, and that tobacco use continues to be the leading cause of preventable deaths in the U.S. contributing to over 500,000 deaths annually. Tobacco and nicotine related deaths each year exceed the number of deaths due to guns, drug overdoses, and traffic fatalities combined.

The explosion of vaping by teens and the impact of nicotine on brain development has created an urgency to address youth access to tobacco and other nicotine containing products. More than 95% of smokers started before age 21, many becoming addicted at an early age, and continuing to smoke as adults. A report by the National Academy of Sciences projected a 25% decrease in smoking rates of high school students if Tobacco-21 was enacted in all states.

Surprisingly, some large tobacco and vaping companies have come out in support of Tobacco-21. The concern with some industry proposals is that any policy change must include an enforcement mechanism and funding to assure compliance and must not pre-empt local regulations which may be stricter, including limits on how close to a school tobacco products can be sold, signage restrictions, and tobacco retailer licensing.

Regulation alone is not enough to lower the toll of tobacco and nicotine on our youth. This policy must be supported by other evidence-based strategies including increased taxes on nicotine containing products, funding for tobacco and vaping prevention programs, and investment in access to effective cessation programs to help users quit.

Tobacco-21 is supported by 74% of U.S. adults and endorsed by the Licking County Board of Health, the American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, American Medical Society, AMVETS, March of Dimes, and others. Model legislation, which includes recommendations for enforcement policies, can be found at www.Tobacco21.org.

Submitted by Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, R.S., M.S., M.B.A.

Read or Share this story: <https://www.newarkadvocate.com/story/news/local/2019/06/02/ebel-tobacco-21-policies-deserve-our-support/1277554001/>