

Health Department

April 24, 2017

House Committee on Health Care
900 Court St. NE - HR E
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SB 754 - T21

Chair Greenlick and members of the House Committee on Health Care, I am writing today on behalf of Multnomah County to urge your support for SB 754, raising the legal minimum sales age for tobacco and inhalant products to 21 years old. I have been a practicing pediatrician in Oregon for over 20 years and also serve as the Tri-County Health Officer for Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington Counties.

Multnomah County would like to express support for Section 27 in this bill, which repeals existing punitive laws for minors who possess, purchase or use tobacco and inhalant delivery products. The last thing youth need is to be caught in a legal system for using products they are addicted to. We would further recommend that the language in Section 4(1) be removed, so that this law cannot be used to facilitate targeting of any youth, especially youth of color.

We know that adolescent brains are uniquely vulnerable to the effects of nicotine, and the initiation age of tobacco use is critical. Among adults who become daily smokers, approximately 90% report first use before reaching 19 years of age, and almost 100% report first use before age 26¹. The majority of underage users rely on social sources—like family and friends—to get tobacco², so raising the minimum legal sales age to 21 will mean that those who can legally obtain tobacco are less likely to be in the same social networks as high school students. Decreasing the number of eligible buyers in high school will help reduce youth smoking by decreasing access to tobacco products during the age when they are most likely to become addicted.

In conversations about raising the minimum legal sales age to 21, some have suggested “grandfathering in” youth who are currently between the ages of 18-20, allowing any individual born after the date of enactment to continue to buy tobacco products. Evidence from Hawaii has shown that this can cause confusion for retailers in

¹ US Dept of Health and Human Services. Preventing tobacco use among youth and young adults: A report of the Surgeon General. 2012.

² Oregon Healthy Teens Survey, 2015

determining who is eligible to purchase tobacco³. Additionally, grandfathering in this way would delay the public health benefit of this policy by three years, meaning our youth would continue using tobacco, increasing their potential of becoming addicted.

According to the Institute of Medicine report released in 2015, “Public Health Implications of Raising the Minimum Age of Legal Access to Tobacco Products,” if the minimum legal age were raised to 21 and implemented now across the US, there would be approximately 223,000 fewer premature deaths for those born between 2000 and 2019.

Increasing the minimum legal sales age for tobacco and inhalant products is a growing policy practice across the country, including the states of Hawaii and California, and over 200 counties and cities,⁴ including Lane County, right here in Oregon. Our state can support the health of our youth, prevent addiction, and ultimately, save lives in our state by raising the legal sales age for tobacco and inhalant products.

Thank you for taking this important action.

Paul Lewis, MD, MPH
Health Officer Multnomah County, Oregon

³ Yamauchi, J. (2017) Letter to Lane County Commissioners, February 9, 2017

⁴ Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids (2017) States and localities that have raised the minimum legal sale age for tobacco products to 21.