

Tobacco 21

By Kari Oldfield, J.D., Executive Director,
Local Public Health Association of MN



It started quietly in the City of Edina, but efforts to protect Minnesota kids from tobacco addiction is spreading like wildfire throughout the state. As of mid-October, 53 cities and counties in Minnesota – rural and urban, small and large – have raised their tobacco sales age to 21, with more communities being added to the count monthly. This movement is bipartisan and tremendously popular. In fact, it even has a name – Tobacco 21.

Right now, our youth are facing an epidemic of nicotine addiction created by rampant use of e-cigarettes like JUUL, which is now partly owned by tobacco giant Altria – home to Philip Morris. With recent news of vaping-related illness and death spreading throughout the country, and hitting us right here in Minnesota, it is even more important to act. As of mid-October, there were three confirmed deaths and more than 70 Minnesotans have confirmed or probable cases of lung injury due to vaping. It is even more urgent to enact policies that protect young people from the harms of tobacco.

Today’s e-cigarettes are a perfect recipe for youth addiction, with stealthy designs, high nicotine content, alluring flavors such as gummy bear and banana split, and aggressive advertising on tv and social media.

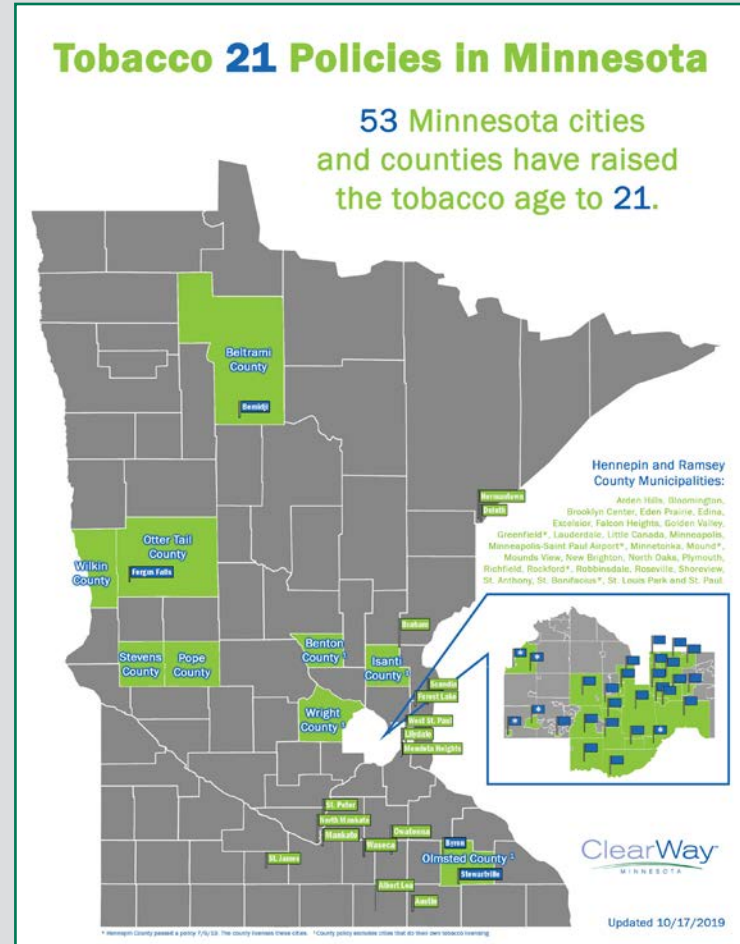
We know most teens get tobacco products through friends and classmates. There are plenty of 18-year-olds in high schools but not 21-year-olds. Tobacco 21 is the best tool we have for delaying initiation of tobacco use, and removing tobacco products from our schools. Nearly 95 percent of adult smokers began by age 21, so we must keep people from starting before then.

Minnesota’s recently released data from the 2019 student survey found that while cigarette use rates are at an all-time low, youth vaping rates are surging among young people. Among 11th graders in Minnesota, one in four said they had used e-cigarettes in the past month, a 54 percent increase in use since 2016.

Young people aren’t understanding the consequences of e-cigarette use and nicotine addiction, with three of four Minnesota 11th graders saying there is either no, slight or a moderate risk to using e-cigarettes. We know nicotine primes the brain for future addiction, inhibits brain development, disrupts attention and impairs learning. After being caught vaping in school, many students say they can’t go

hours without using. If young people are addicted, the addiction is all they think about in class – not the subject being taught.

Minnesota is not alone in facing this health crisis, but we are falling behind. Eighteen states have already passed Tobacco 21, and several more are considering statewide policies. Raising the tobacco age to 21 is a lifesaving policy that protects Minnesota youth from initiating tobacco use. Just as in the Freedom to Breathe movement, local Tobacco 21 communities are chartering a path for statewide action. During the upcoming legislative session, the Local Public Health Association, along with statewide partners, will be advocating for a statewide Tobacco 21 policy along with other policies that protect our young people from a lifetime of tobacco addiction. ■



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