



Smoky haze

Curb youth tobacco use to lower future healthcare costs.

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The cultural and legislative battle to curb teen smoking has been a long-waged effort, and the war has a new front: e-cigarettes.

While current traditional cigarette smoking declined among middle and high school students from 2011 to 2015, use of e-cigs increased at an alarming rate, growing "an astonishing" 900 percent in that time period, according to U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy. Moreover, e-cigs are now the most commonly used tobacco product among youth in the United States.

So an effort by Texas lawmakers to protect the health of minors makes sense. A proposal, sponsored by state Sen. Carlos Uresti, D-San Antonio, and state Rep. John Zerwas, R-Richmond, calls for raising the minimum legal age to buy or possess tobacco products and electronic cigarettes from 18 to 21. In addition to the restriction on minors, the plan has the potential of lowering health-care costs in the long term. The plan has bipartisan support.

Zerwas, a Richmond physician, told the San Antonio Express-News that the goal of the legislation is to widen the gap between the availability of tobacco products and high school-age people.

The proposal merits passage by the Texas Legislature. Consider the following:

According to the American Lung Association, tobacco use during childhood and adolescence not only can cause major health problems, but people who begin smoking at an early age are more likely to develop a severe addiction than those who start at a later age.

Each day in the United States, more than 3,200 youth 18 years or younger smoke their first cigarette, and an additional 2,100 youth and young adults become daily cigarette smokers, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Tobacco use remains the single-largest preventable cause of death and disease in the nation, according to the CDC.

Opposition to Uresti's proposal is a sure certainty, but we encourage and urge lawmakers to take the long view and weigh the benefits of deterring youth from starting a bad habit that could have life-long, dire consequences.