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## **TIME TO KEEP TOBACCO OUT OF THE HANDS OF TEXAS TEENS**

*Broad coalition supports legislation to stop tobacco sales to Texans under 21*

Stopping the sale of tobacco products to Texans under age 21 is sound policy and common sense, saves lives and dollars, and is overwhelmingly supported by Texans, according to a broad base of supporters who joined in a press conference Tuesday.

Texas legislators, Texas 21 (a coalition of more than 75 public health groups), physicians, and youth and military advocates voiced their support for House Bill 749 by Rep. John Zerwas, MD, (R-Richmond) and Senate Bill 21 by Sen. Joan Huffman (R-Houston). The bills would raise the minimum legal tobacco sale age from 18 to 21. [HB 749 will be heard in House Public Health on Wednesday \(March 6\).](#)

“It’s time for our state to do what it can to protect our youth from a lifetime of nicotine addiction, from a lifetime struggling with chronic disease, and from a lifetime cut short because of tobacco,” said Dr. John Carlo, chairman of the Texas Public Health Coalition and member of the Texas Medical Association’s Council on Legislation. “It’s time for T21.”

About 95 percent of smokers start before age 21. In Texas, 7.4 percent of high school students smoke and over 10 percent use e-cigarettes, while 10,400 kids become daily smokers every year. Nearly half a million (498,000) Texas kids alive now will ultimately die prematurely from smoking if current trends continue.

“I am astounded that it’s been well over five decades since the first Surgeon General’s Report in 1964 on Smoking and Health, since we’ve first known of tobacco’s carcinogenic effects,” said Carlo, a preventative medicine specialist. “It’s been almost 40 years since the tobacco industry was quoted calling ‘today’s teenagers’ ‘tomorrow’s potential regular customer’ – and yet, here we are, still having this fight. Tobacco use continues to be the number one cause of preventable chronic diseases and premature death in Texas.”

Passing a law to reduce tobacco use is a sound health policy that also pays tremendous dividends by preventing diseases that cost the most to treat, Zerwas said.

“As a physician, the health-related importance of this proposed legislation can’t be denied,” Zerwas said. “As chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, I’d also like to point out that Tobacco 21 isn’t just responsible public health policy, but it’s also fiscally responsible for the State of Texas.”

Every year [smoking costs Texas](#) \$8.85 billion in direct health care costs, \$1.96 billion in Medicaid costs and \$8.22 billion in lost productivity. In addition, each Texas household pays \$747 in state and federal taxes due to smoking-caused government expenditures.

More than two-thirds of Texas voters – 67 percent – favor raising the tobacco sale age to 21, Huffman said, citing a [statewide poll of voters commissioned by Texas 21](#). That support spans the state as well as political and ideological spectrums, from Republican to Democrat, from conservative to liberal.

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“I am encouraged by this poll that 2019 will be the year we pass a Tobacco 21 law,” Huffman said. “I urge all Texans who agree to take a stand for our children and contact their senator and representative to ask them to support House Bill 749 and Senate Bill 21.”

Huffman said she is especially concerned about the rapid rise in the use of e-cigarettes since the last Texas legislative session. [E-cigarettes must be covered by the proposed bills](#), she said.

A recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that e-cigarette use grew nationally by 1.5 million kids between 2017-2018, erasing past progress in reducing youth tobacco use. The U.S. Surgeon General has issued an advisory declaring e-cigarette use among youth “an epidemic.”

Kellen Kruk, a senior at Pineywoods Community Academy in Lufkin, said he’s seen an astonishing surge in the use of e-cigarettes by his classmates. Kruk, 18, is founder and president of his school’s “Say What!” (a statewide youth tobacco prevention coalition) as well as a local, state and national advocate for raising the tobacco age to 21.

“As an 18-year-old, I could go buy tobacco or e-cigarettes legally and share them with my peers,” Kruk said. “I see students at my school who are already addicted to nicotine. They think it’s cool to use e-cigarettes. Tobacco 21 needs to be implemented in Texas so that it takes tobacco out of the hands of high schoolers. We should be graduating with a diploma, not a lifelong addiction to tobacco.”

Seven states have raised the legal minimum tobacco sale age to 21, along with at least 430 localities, including San Antonio.

Laws in two of those states exempt the military, meaning service members 18 and older can continue to purchase tobacco on and off military bases and installations. Such an exemption in Texas would be a mistake, said Brian Hayden of Universal City, a retired Air Force master sergeant and survivor of a heart attack, heart transplant and lung cancer. Hayden said his experiences have made him passionate that [a statewide law to stop the sale of tobacco to those under age 21 must include the military](#).

“Yes, Texans can join the military at age 18,” Hayden said. “But it’s flawed logic to argue that you should be old enough to smoke if you’re old enough to fight for your country. Tobacco use is a lethal and addictive behavior, not some rite of passage or sign of adulthood.”

*The Texas 21 Coalition includes more than [75 health organizations](#), including the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), American Heart Association, American Lung Association, Texas Academy of Family Physicians, Texas Medical Association, Texas Pediatric Society and Texas Public Health Coalition. The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center is present as an educational resource only. More information can be found at [www.texas21.org](http://www.texas21.org). Follow the Coalition on Facebook at [/texastobacco21](https://www.facebook.com/texastobacco21) and Twitter at [@TexasTobacco21](https://twitter.com/TexasTobacco21).*

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**The following fact sheets can be found at [www.texas21.org](http://www.texas21.org):**

[It’s Time to Raise the Tobacco Age to 21 in Texas](#)

[Texas Overwhelmingly Supports Raising the Tobacco Age to 21](#)

[The Huge Toll of Tobacco in Texas](#)

[Electronic Cigarettes & Tobacco 21](#)

[Tobacco Use: Lethal & Addictive, And a Threat to Our Military](#)

[21 Reasons to Raise the Tobacco Sale Age to 21 in Texas](#)

[Raise the Tobacco Age to 21: We Can’t Afford Not To](#)