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65% of Vermont Adults Believe Flavored Tobacco Products Should Be Illegal

Survey shows flavored tobacco, especially fruit and candy flavors, appeals to youth

BURLINGTON – High school youth activists joined community tobacco coalition volunteers and state health officials today in releasing the results of a public opinion survey that illustrates the role flavored tobacco products play in introducing youth to tobacco use.

Amaya Rogers, a freshman at Harwood Union High School presented the results with Burlington High School senior Noah Smith. Rogers said a key point she learned is that youth were twice as likely as adults to try a flavored tobacco product. “For one part of the survey, we presented photos of flavored and non-flavored tobacco products, without words or labels on them so people could see them just as they would when shopping,” said Rogers. “The results tell me that tobacco companies are successfully targeting my age group.”

Anna Piro, a junior at St. Johnsbury Academy, said the first time she heard about flavored tobacco was while in class. “Because of the flavors they were talking about, I thought it was some kind of candy.”

The report, “*Sweet. Colorful. Toxic.*” was prepared for the Vermont Department of Health’s CounterBalance initiative to examine public perceptions and knowledge of flavored tobacco products. The survey found many young people believe flavored tobacco products were probably safer than their mainstream counterparts, and that 86 percent of adults believe flavored tobacco is more appealing to children than non-flavored tobacco. The survey also shows there is broad support for restricting the sale of fruit- and candy-flavored tobacco products, including cigarillos, e-cigarettes and smokeless tobacco. More than 2,000 Vermont residents took part in the survey, which was administered between December 2016 and February 2017.

“This survey shows that Vermonters have deep misgivings about the presence of flavored tobacco products like strawberry cigarillos, cotton candy e-cigarette juice, and peach-flavored dip.” said Deputy Health Commissioner Barbara Cimaglio. “At the same time, I am very troubled by the concerted and effective marketing efforts aimed at enticing our young people to try a tobacco product.”

“Our job is to help ensure youth don’t start down the road of addiction of any kind,” said Cimaglio, who leads the department’s drug and alcohol prevention programs. “In the past 14 years, we’ve reduced youth smoking prevalence from 24 to 11 percent, but these gains are tenuous. The results clearly provide Vermont-specific evidence about why we need to end the influence of flavored tobacco.”

The survey was conducted by community and youth volunteers involved in the CounterBalance initiative, to inform stakeholders and policymakers and the public about people’s opinions and understanding of flavored tobacco products. CounterBalance is a statewide initiative to educate and engage communities around the impact tobacco retail marketing has on Vermont’s youth, and to raise awareness about the dangers of flavored tobacco products.

“One of the major challenges that I encounter when working on CounterBalance is the lack of knowledge around some of the tobacco products,” said Burlington High School’s Noah Smith. “I often hear teens in my school think that these products are less harmful than regular tobacco.”

Rogers agreed, “It’s been interesting to educate my classmates about how harmful these are to their bodies.”

Key findings include:

- **Vermonters perceive fruit- and candy-flavored tobacco products as more appealing to children than non-flavored tobacco products.** Three out of four of all respondents agreed with that statement, including 75 percent of youth and 86 percent of adults age 24 and older.
- **Youth are more likely to try a flavored tobacco than adults.** One in five youth (age 17 and younger) reported being willing to try a flavored tobacco, compared to one in ten adults (age 24 and older). This was true for e-cigarettes, cigars, and smokeless tobacco, with 28 percent, 22 percent, and 17 percent of youth being willing to try flavored varieties as compared to 14 percent, 13 percent, and 7 percent of adults, respectively.
- **Vermont youth tobacco users lack information about the dangers of flavored tobacco.** Almost one out of four youth tobacco users believed flavored tobacco to be “probably or definitely safer” than non-flavored tobacco, or were not sure.

- **Young Vermonters do not understand the health risks of non-cigarette tobacco products.** Youth are vulnerable to misleading messages about the relative safety of flavored tobacco. This finding was illustrated across multiple product categories. Nearly 40 percent of youth believed little cigars or cigarillos were less harmful than cigarettes; 33 percent believed that snus was less harmful than cigarettes; and more than half (56 percent) believed the same about electronic cigarettes.
- **Vermonters believe that it should be illegal for tobacco products to be sold in candy or fruit flavors,** including flavored cigarillos, flavored electronic cigarettes, and flavored smokeless tobacco. 65 percent of respondents age 18 and older said they believed flavored tobacco sales should be illegal. 71 percent of adults 24 and up, and more than half of all survey respondents, believe it should be against the law.

“These results paint a clear picture of dangerous products and a vulnerable target audience,” said Cimaglio.

See the report and learn more about the CounterBalance initiative at CounterBalanceVT.com.

For more information about Vermont’s smoke-free laws, tobacco control data and free quit help from 802Quits, visit healthvermont.gov/wellness/tobacco.

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