

Oregon tobacco-sales to minors at record low

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Coming off the most encouraging results ever, Oregon this month begins a new round of unannounced visits to the state's tobacco retailers to check compliance with laws forbidding sales to minors.

In the 2006 inspections, clerks at 11 percent of the 489 retailers visited sold to minors, the state's lowest recorded rate in the 12 years of the program and less than a third of the rates recorded during the first two years of inspections, 1995-96.

"The low rate reflects a national decline in tobacco sales to minors, a rising public consciousness about the alarming health risks of tobacco and a growing recognition among retailers that they play a vital role in this challenging public health issue," said Bob Nikkel, Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) assistant director for addictions and mental health.

The lowest previous rate of sales was 14.6 percent in 2004. The 2005 sales rate was 17.8 percent.

In conducting the inspections, a retired Oregon State Police officer and a minor buyer visit randomly selected tobacco retailers. The minor, who is and looks age 15 or 16, attempts to purchase cigarettes. If the clerk sells, he or she is cited and can be subject to a fine of \$100 to \$700 for selling tobacco to a person under age 18.

Nikkel said this year's inspections will be conducted at 702 of the approximately 3,000 Oregon retailers that sell tobacco. Last year, Nikkel said, the highest rates of sales to minors occurred at mini marts, small food markets and gasoline stations while the lowest were at tobacco shops, department stores and drug stores.

Counties in which 10 or more retailers were visited, and in which the sales rates were equal to or better than the 11 percent statewide rate, were Benton, Coos, Deschutes, Jackson, Jefferson, Josephine, Klamath, Lincoln,

Linn, Wasco and Washington, said Nikkel.

He said most sales occur as a result of a clerk either not checking the youth's identification or checking it but failing to accurately compute the individual's age.

"Tobacco is the leading preventable cause of disease, disability and death," Nikkel said. "Whenever we see a clerk checking ID or refusing to sell to a minor, we should say we appreciate the extra effort both to obey the law and to protect people's health." He said ODHS has an education packet available to merchants who would like additional assistance in training their employees.

Nikkel said most addicted adult smokers took up the habit as teenagers. Nationally, he said, the lowest rates of tobacco sales to minors tend to be in states that license tobacco retailers and can revoke the license for sales to minors.

If a state records a sales rate of more than 20 percent, it can lose up to 40 percent of its federal substance abuse prevention and treatment block grant. After recording a sales rate exceeding 23 percent during the 1999-2000 inspections, Oregon was required to expand its program by visiting all tobacco retailers for three years.

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