

Part 2: Officials aim to stop youth tobacco use

Laura Petersen 18.FEB.09

Last week, The Advocate explored tobacco use among adults and ways to get on the fast track to quitting in a two-part series focusing on tobacco use. This week we investigate youth tobacco use, preventative tactics to keep tobacco products out of the hands of minors and how residents can help the effort.

Youth tobacco use and prevention

Tobacco use among youths can cause a variety of health issues, and often serves as a gateway drug to alcohol and marijuana, according to local officials.

"Specialists in the field have identified those youths using tobacco products are more likely to experiment with alcohol and drugs," said Maj. Phil Kasten, spokesman for the Carroll County Sheriff's Office. "It's not just a mere statement, it is proven clinical research."

According to the Office of the Surgeon General, smoking can stunt lung development and cause wheezing and coughing within just one week of smoking for adolescents.

"A lot of teens think smoking is not going to hurt them," said Dawn Eldridge, community health educator for the Carroll County Health Department. "But what they don't know is that it's incredibly hard to quit later."

Dawn Rathgeber, county coordinator of health education for grades K-12, said starting tobacco education early is key in preventing tobacco use among youths in the future.

"Tobacco education is very heavy in the curriculum for kindergarten through ninth grade," she said. "The D.A.R.E. program is taught in science classes in sixth grade, which focuses on resistance techniques."

County schools partner with the health department to bring additional information and education to students, Rathgeber said. The curriculum teaches the physical, psychological, social and legal consequences of tobacco use, as well as how to develop skills to combat peer pressure.

Laurie Hegg, coordinator of community grants and tobacco enforcement for the Health Department, said youth tobacco enforcement must come from all sides, including tobacco product vendors.

Distributing tobacco products to customers under the age of 18 can land vendors with a civil citation and \$300 fine, followed by a \$500 fine for any subsequent violations within two years.

To measure the compliance rate among vendors in the county, the Health Department, in conjunction with local law enforcement agencies, recruit youths to try to purchase tobacco products. Youths can earn service hours for participation in the program, which is organized by police.

"There is certain protocol to follow, the youth and officer must go to a location, the youth asks to purchase tobacco and if they do, they go straight to the officer outside to turn in the product," Hegg said. "We give the officers money to do the overtime tobacco enforcement and, in turn, they keep documentation of the date to return back to us."

In March 2002, only 53 percent of Carroll's tobacco vendors were compliant with laws prohibiting tobacco sales to minors. By May 2008, 99 percent of all Carroll's vendors were compliant.

"We've come a long way," Hegg said. "Almost all of our vendors are now complying [with] the law." Eldridge reminded youths that it is illegal to carry tobacco products until age 18.

"Even if you're not smoking it, it is still illegal," she said.

Aside from the health dangers to minors, tobacco use can also lead to a lifetime of poor decisions, Kasten said.

"At any given time, 80 percent of offenders are in the [Carroll County Detention Center] for substance abuse, crime or petty crime to support substance abuse," he said. "Clinical research has demonstrated a clear link between tobacco use and alcohol and drug abuse by minors into adulthood; then the potential of committing crime to support those habits into adulthood. It impacts the entire community."

Clearing the smoke

Smoking is becoming more and more difficult for many as smoking bans are passed and prices for cigarettes continue to increase.

Last year in February, The Maryland Clean Indoor Air Act took effect — with many other states following suit - with positive results, said Susan Rinehart, Carroll County Health Department Tobacco Cessation Coordinator.

"Areas that have passed clean air acts have seen a decrease in emergency room patients," she explained. "They've really seen a difference in the amount of heart problems and issues with second-hand smoke."

Decreasing statistics of tobacco use is a good sign, but the fight is far from over, Hegg said.

"It only takes two or three cigarettes to open the flood gates of addiction for our youth," she said. "When I was a teenager we didn't know all the health risks of tobacco use, and even though the information is out there today, I feel teens still encounter the same kind of pressure to use."

For those who would like to assist in the fight against tobacco use, volunteer opportunities are available at the health department and the Smoke Free Carroll County Coalition, an affiliate of the Partnership for a Healthier Carroll County.

Lexi Schafer, CHIA specialist for the Partnership for a Healthier Carroll County, said Smoke Free Carroll County has close to 40 members who raise awareness and provide literature on the effects of tobacco use for local physicians.

"Smoke Free Carroll County is made of a variety of professionals interested in smoking cessation," she said. "We promote classes and raise awareness about smoking in the community."

Opportunities to quit have always been available in the community and now, those opportunities are even more prominent, Rinehart said.

Quitting may be difficult, but it is possible, she said.

"It's important to surround yourself with positive people and learn from relapses instead of beating yourself up," Rinehart said. "It's never too late to quit."

Reach staff writer Laura Petersen at 410-857-3317 or laura.petersen@eldersburgadvocate.com.

- Advocate Staff Writer