

NJ lawmakers propose upping cigarette-buying age to 21

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TRENTON — You can't legally buy alcohol and drink until you're 21, and now two state lawmakers want to restrict cigarette and tobacco sales in New Jersey to the same age.

Anyone age 19 and older can buy a pack of smokes in the Garden State.

But Sen. Richard Codey, D-27th of West Orange, and Assemblyman Ruben Ramos, D-33rd of Hoboken, announced at a news conference in New York City, where officials also are considering a similar measure, that they would introduce legislation to increase the cigarette-buying age in New Jersey. They attended the conference at City Hall with Christine Quinn, the City Council speaker who along with colleagues has proposed raising the age limit there from 18 to 21.

Some New York state lawmakers also have proposed similar legislation since the city sparked interest in the idea last month.

"I think we have to send a message to our young adults: to smoke is no joke," Codey said. "Research shows that a large majority of casual smokers become addicted between the ages of 18 and 21. If we can limit access to tobacco products during those formative years it will buy them time that could save their lives."

Codey, during his stint as governor in 2006, successfully led the effort in New Jersey to raise the age to buy cigarettes and other tobacco products from 18 to 19. He also signed the law that bans smoking at bars, restaurants and in the workplace.

The facts and figures are devastating," Codey said. "Each and every year an estimated 400,000 smokers in Americans die prematurely and another 50,000 non-smokers die from second-hand smoke."

He said direct health care costs and indirect costs to the economy from tobacco use add up to \$157 billion a year.

"That calculates to \$7.17 for each pack of cigarettes," the senator said.

The penalty would be on the seller, under Codey's bill, with civil fines of \$250 for the first offense, \$500 for a second violation and \$1,000 for subsequent violations of the age requirement.

Here in Burlington County, the county and a number of its municipalities have either recently or are in the process of banning smoking and tobacco in public parks. The parks

ban is not state law.

Ruben said he and Codey will introduce their legislation Monday.

In 1999, Ramos was diagnosed with cancer. He is a nonsmoker and blamed his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma on "stuff that just happens," but he knows what it's like to fight serious illness.

"You think you're invisible when you're younger, and I learned I wasn't," Ramos said. "If we can keep these kids at 19 and 20 from smoking, maybe by the time they are 21 they won't want to, and we can save them from the health problems and chemo that I faced."

He said making it tougher for young people to buy cigarettes by raising the minimum age ultimately could lead to healthier, longer lives.

"We all know that if you start smoking at a younger age, you are more likely to become a lifelong smoker. We want to prevent that and promote healthier lifestyles," Ramos said.

New York and New Jersey wouldn't be the first to increase the age. The threshold already has been raised to 21 in two Boston suburbs. Also, some counties in New York have boosted it to 19.

Under federal law, no one under 18 can buy tobacco anywhere in the country.

Advocates say higher age limits help stop, or at least delay, young people from developing a habit that remains the leading cause of preventable deaths in the United States, despite decades of efforts to call attention to its dangers. The measures make it tougher for 18- to 20-year-olds to obtain cigarettes for themselves and younger friends, supporters say.

Representatives for two major tobacco companies — Altria Group Inc., which produces the top-selling Marlboro brand, and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., maker of brands that include Camel — did not immediately respond to requests for comment Thursday.

Higher age limits have faced criticism from smokers' rights advocates, who feel the restrictions are unfair and patronizing to an age group considered old enough to make such adult decisions as voting and serving in the military. Some retailers have suggested that younger smokers may just turn to black-market merchants or to nearby areas with lower age limits.

The New York and New Jersey advocates say that's a good reason to set the limit at 21 nationwide.

http://m.phillyburbs.com/news/local/burlington_county_times_news/nj-lawmakers-propose-upping-cigarette-buying-age-to/article_cf252e49-466f-5079-821a-fb4092d5a904.html