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07/17/2024

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NEWS RELEASE

Tobacco Store Audits in Holmes County

Millersburg, OH –

According to the 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, every day in the United States, over 1,400 youths aged 12-17 try their first cigarette, and over 4,300 try their first e-cigarette. One of the biggest influencing factors behind this experimentation? The advertisements and promotions of tobacco products by tobacco companies within the retail stores that youths frequent. Retail stores have become the primary location for tobacco companies to target both potential and established customers. In fact, tobacco companies spend most of their marketing expenditures in the retail environment on price discounts and promotional allowances to keep their products cheap and visible at the point of sale.

Historically, tobacco companies have directed marketing towards youth, with a released Phillip Morris tobacco company internal document from 1981 explaining the importance of the teen market as “Today’s teenager is tomorrow’s potential regular customer”. Targeting teens has become so common that the 2021 National Youth Tobacco Survey found that seven out of ten middle school and high school students in the United States were exposed to e-cigarette marketing; in addition to seeing ads on the internet, TV, streaming services, and social media, most students reported marketing exposure in retail settings. This is especially problematic because the Surgeon General in 2012 reported that compared to adults, kids are three times as sensitive to tobacco advertisements, and are also more likely to be influenced by tobacco marketing than by peer pressure.

In Holmes County, there are twenty-four retail stores authorized to sell tobacco products, with the most, fourteen stores, being concentrated in Millersburg. Most of the county’s tobacco

retailers are either convenience stores (58.3%) or discount stores (20.8%). To better understand the influence of tobacco companies on local tobacco retailers, youth volunteers for the Holmes County General Health District conducted store audits at twenty retail stores located across the county. At each location, youth examined exterior and interior advertisements, the placement of tobacco products, available price promotions, and the overall price and variety of tobacco products available. All audited stores sell both cigarettes and smokeless tobacco, with the majority also selling cigarillos and cigars.

In Holmes County, 65% of audited retail stores posted age identification signs. Age identification signs are important to limit youth accessibility and discourage underage purchasing. Overall, in the United States, stores closer to schools tend to be less likely to display signs with age or identification requirements and are also more likely to have a greater number of tobacco advertisements. On the other hand, stores with posted age identification signage have less tobacco advertisements and are less likely to sell to an underaged purchaser. The store audits found that only 50% of tobacco retailers in Holmes County had tobacco advertisements displayed outside the store, and only two stores had a substantial number of tobacco advertisements that covered more than half of their window's total square footage.

Tobacco companies target youth in the retail environment through intentional product placement. Tobacco advertisements are often placed within three feet from the floor, or at roughly a child's eye level, and tobacco products are often placed near candy and other youth appealing products. In Holmes County, 25% of retailers had tobacco advertisements less than three feet from the floor, and 10% had tobacco products within twelve inches of youth-appealing products. Price promotions, for example a special price when buying two of a product, are another tactic often used to lower the price, making it more accessible to youth. Seventy percent of Holmes County tobacco retailers offered a price promotion on at least one type of tobacco product and 60% had price promotions on at least one flavored tobacco product. Price promotions were most commonly available for cigarettes, menthol cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, and flavored smokeless tobacco products.

Since 2014, e-cigarettes have been the most used tobacco product by youths in the United States. In Holmes County, 50% of tobacco retailers sell e-cigarettes, with most selling either disposable or cartridge-based e-cigarettes. VUSE and NJOY are two commonly identified brands found in local stores; both are on the FDA's short list of e-cigarettes authorized for sale in the

United States. As of late June 2024, the FDA has only authorized twenty-seven e-cigarettes for sale, including mostly nonflavored tobacco e-cigarettes and four NJOY menthol flavored e-cigarettes, which were recently authorized after an extensive scientific review concluded the products benefited adults that completely switched from cigarettes to these products. While these products are seen as safer for adults than the continued use of cigarettes, e-cigarettes often come with high levels of nicotine and are not a safe product, especially for youth. The availability of flavored e-cigarettes in not only menthol, but candy and fruit flavors, is one of the main reasons that many youths report ever trying an e-cigarette. As a result of this youth appeal, the FDA has not authorized any other flavored e-cigarette for sale. Despite this, unauthorized flavored e-cigarettes are still commonly sold in retail stores across the nation, with 90% of the local tobacco retailers that sell e-cigarettes also selling flavored varieties.

Understanding how the retail environment can influence a youth's decision to stay vape and tobacco free is important. Exposure to advertisements, discounts, and enticing flavors encourage youth to experiment with tobacco and nicotine products. For teens needing help to quit vaping, text "start my quit" to 36072 to enroll in My Life, My Quit. My Life, My Quit is a free service available to Ohio teenagers for help with developing a quit plan, learning coping strategies, and more. The influence of tobacco companies in the retail environment does not just affect youths; exposure to advertisements and discounts can prompt cravings and encourage impulse buys in adults attempting to quit tobacco. For adults needing help, call the Ohio Tobacco Quitline at 1-800-QUIT-NOW to speak with a coach about assistance with quitting smoking.

For questions concerning the store audits, please contact Kelly Dremann, Tobacco Cessation Coordinator, at the Holmes County General Health District by calling 330-674-5035.