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Minor setback for e-cigarettes

Massachusetts may be joining most other states in banning sales of e-cigarettes to people under 18, but Peabody is taking that a step further by making the minimum age for sales on tobacco products and e-cigarettes in its city 21 years old.

Sharon Cameron, health director for Peabody, said the town already has a local regulation prohibiting the sale of e-cigarettes to those under 18. That will increase to age 21 once the town's minimum age for the sale of tobacco products is increased by three years, even though e-cigarettes do not contain tobacco.

Cameron said that age increase, which was approved by the Board of Health Aug. 27, will go into effect Jan. 1. She said other communities, such as Danvers, Salem and Saugus, already have a minimum age of 21 for sales. Swampscott has also discussed raising the age for tobacco sales to 21.

Cameron said there isn't much hard science on potentially harmful effects of e-cigarettes, but said there can be risk from the chemical compounds in the vaping exhaust. She said there is "certainly reason to be concerned," citing that nicotine products are known to be addictive.

Cameron said having a statewide ban on sales of e-cigarettes to those under 18 would provide a "level playing field" for businesses.

"It's easier in terms of education and compliance to have one set of standards in effect," Cameron said.

Attorney General Maura Healey's office announced Monday the finalized regulations, most of which will go into effect on Sept. 25, for tightening the sale of the popular electronic smoking devices, which contain nicotine.

With the finalized regulations, Massachusetts joins at least 46 states which prohibit the sales of e-cigarettes to minors, according to published reports.

The regulations include establishing a minimum sales age of 18 statewide, except where towns may already have a higher minimum age, prohibiting sampling, promotional giveaways and other free distributions related to e-cigarettes and prohibiting any sales of e-cigarettes other than a face-to-face exchange. Retailers are also required to keep the product in a location only accessible to store employees.

The only regulation that will not go into effect on Sept. 25 is one that requires nicotine liquid or gel to be sold in child-resistant packaging that meets federal standards. According to Healey's office, the regulation is to address concerns that children may ingest the liquid or gel inside e-cigarettes after being attracted to the "bright colors and child-friendly flavors that liquid and gel nicotine are sold in, such as bubble gum, French toast and gummi bear." This regulation will be effective March 15.

"The growth of the e-cigarette market has posed a serious public health risk to Massachusetts residents and calls for a strict oversight to protect our young people," Healey said. "Now that these regulations are in place, businesses will be required to keep these addictive products out of the hands of minors, an important step to further reduce youth smoking."

Employees at Mass Vapor, a store in Lynn which sells e-cigarettes, are in favor of the statewide ban on sales to minors.

Christian Reyes said the restriction was already in place in Lynn for around two to three years. The store has a large sign in the front which clarifies that only those 18 and older are able to purchase products. Reyes said the ban should be for those under 18.

"If you're 18, you should be able to vape," Reyes said.

Dillon Ferreras said the nicotine in e-cigarettes is just like that in cigarettes. He said he is in favor of the minimum age for sales being 18, but does not think 21 is reasonable.

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