



Alaska Native Health Board

THE VOICE OF ALASKA TRIBAL HEALTH SINCE 1968

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February 28, 2025

The Honorable Gary Stevens
Alaska Senate
State Capitol Building, Room 111
Juneau AK, 99801

RE: Support for Increasing the Minimum Age for Purchasing Tobacco Products

Dear Senator Stevens,

The Alaska Native Health Board (ANHB)¹ writes in support of Senate Bill 24, which would increase the minimum age for purchasing tobacco products from 19 to 21, aligning Alaska state law with the federal minimum age for tobacco sales.

In 1992, Congress passed the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration Reorganization Act (P.L. 102-321), including section 1926, also known as the Synar Amendment. Under the Synar Amendment, states were required to enact and enforce laws prohibiting tobacco product sales and distribution to individuals under 18 or risk losing up to 10% of their Substance Use Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Services Block Grant (SUBG) funds.² Subsequently, Congress passed superseding legislation in 2019, the Tobacco to 21 Act (P.L. 116-94), increasing the federal minimum age to purchase tobacco products from 18 to 21. The SUBG provides funding for substance abuse treatment and prevention services across Alaska. Ensuring the continuity of these services, including tobacco and nicotine use prevention and cessation services, is critical to the health and well-being of all Alaskans.

According to the 2024 National Youth Tobacco Survey, electronic cigarettes were the most commonly reported tobacco products used among middle and high school students nationally, followed by nicotine patches.³ Between 2015 and 2019, youth e-cigarette use in Alaska increased significantly from 18% to 26%, reflecting the growing need for legislation and resources to support our youth.⁴

¹ Established in 1968, ANHB's mission is to promote the spiritual, physical, mental, social, and cultural well-being and pride of Alaska Native people. ANHB is the statewide voice on Alaska Native health issues for the Alaska Tribal Health System, which is comprised of Tribes/Tribal Health Organizations that serve all 229 Tribes and over 188,000 Alaska Native and American Indian people throughout the Alaska. As the statewide advocacy organization, ANHB supports achieving effective consultation and communication with state and federal agencies on matters of concern.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Programmatic Requirements for the Synar Program*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Accessed February 2025, <https://www.samhsa.gov/substance-use/learn/tobacco-vaping/synar/requirements>.

³ Jamal A, Park-Lee E, Birdsey J, et al. *Tobacco Product Use Among Middle and High School Students – National Youth Tobacco Survey*, United States, 2024. MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 2024; 73:917-924. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7341a2>

⁴ Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) 2015-2019.

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HEALTH CONSORTIUM

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ISLANDS ASSOCIATION

ARCTIC SLOPE
NATIVE ASSOCIATION

BRISTOL BAY AREA
HEALTH CORPORATION

CHICKALOON VILLAGE
TRADITIONAL COUNCIL

CHUGACHMIUT

COPPER RIVER
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EASTERN ALEUTIAN TRIBES

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HEALTH CORPORATION

VALDEZ NATIVE TRIBE

Raising the minimum age for tobacco sales is an important step in addressing adolescent tobacco use in Alaska and preventing future tobacco-related illnesses and deaths.

Over the past few decades, significant progress has been made in reducing adolescent cigarette smoking, but the youth e-cigarette pandemic has the potential to stall or reverse this progress. In 2015, a report by the Institute of Medicine found that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to nicotine addiction, and raising the minimum age to purchase tobacco, nicotine, and vaping products to 21 would help to prevent initiation of tobacco use by adolescents and young adults, preventing an estimated 223,000 deaths among people born between 2000 and 2019.⁵

Senate Bill 24 prioritizes protecting the health of Alaska's youth from what could be a lifelong nicotine addiction and saving lives by reducing tobacco-related deaths. Furthermore, this legislation supports the Healthy Alaskans 2030 initiative, the State and Tribal health improvement plan, to achieve their public health objective to reduce adolescent tobacco use in Alaskan communities.⁶ Lastly, we cannot continue to risk access to full federal funding for critical substance abuse treatment and prevention services. To ensure this essential funding stream continues, we support Senate Bill 24 and state alignment with the federal minimum age to purchase tobacco products.

ANHB appreciates the opportunity to share our comments and support efforts that reduce youth access to tobacco products, promoting the health of Alaskan communities. If you or your staff have any comments or questions about our letter, please contact ANHB at anhb@anhb.org or via telephone at (907) 729-7510.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W F Smith".

Chief William F. Smith, Chairman
Alaska Native Health Board
Tribally-Elected Leader of the Valdez Native Tribe

CC: Senate.Labor.And.Commerce@akleg.gov

⁵ Institute of Medicine. *Public Health Implications of Raising the Minimum Age of Legal Access to Tobacco Products*. National Academies Press (US), 23 July 2015. doi:10.17226/18997

⁶ State Health Improvement Plan. *Healthy Alaskans 2030 Priority Health Topics and Health Objectives*. Healthy Alaskans 2030. Accessed February 2025, <https://www.healthyalaskans.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HA2030-Objectives.pdf>