

## New Tobacco Legislation Would Protect District's Children

By Jodi Kwarciany

New legislation before the DC Council would prevent more children from starting to smoke and would support individuals who want to quit, by increasing the District's tobacco tax and strengthening DC's smoking cessation efforts. The Council should move forward with this legislation soon.

Although smoking rates are on the decline nationally, a large share of DC's youth continue to smoke. Nearly 13 percent of DC high school students smoke, and each year about 1,000 DC children try cigarettes for the first time. That sets them up for a potential lifetime of addiction before they even leave high school. Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable deaths, killing 800 adults in DC each year. At today's rate, 7,000 DC children alive today will die from smoking.

[Bill 22-0460](#), the "Department of Health Smoking Cessation Fund Amendment of 2017," increases DC's tobacco tax by \$2.00, adding to the current rate of \$2.50. A portion of the new revenue would support tobacco cessation initiatives, including implementing a law to raise the tobacco age to 21 that has been adopted but not yet put into effect.

Increasing the tobacco tax is an effective way to reduce smoking, especially among youth, since they are very price-sensitive, according to the [Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids](#). Large increases are key—the sticker shock has to be enough to incentivize folks to quit. Every 10 percent increase in the price of cigarettes reduces consumption among smokers by three to five percent. For children who smoke, the reduction is six to seven percent. Moreover, research shows that cigarette price and tax increases work effectively to reduce smoking among pregnant women.

Improving public health also means lower expenditures in DC's health programs. Each year, DC spends \$95 million in Medicaid caused by smoking. Savings from reduced smoking rates could potentially save millions over time, as Medicaid covers about 22 percent of all District residents, but 50 percent of DC's youth under 18.



Raising tobacco taxes create a win-win by both reducing cigarette sales and boosting revenue. The [last](#) time DC increased its cigarette tax by doubling it from \$1 to \$2 per pack in 2008 sales of cigarette packs dropped by 26 percent, while revenue from cigarette taxes nearly doubled, generating \$13 million. DC can anticipate a similar phenomenon by increasing the tax by \$2.00 per pack.

Although the bill to raise tobacco taxes was introduced earlier this fall, it has not been scheduled for a committee hearing. The Council's Finance and Revenue Committee should schedule a hearing – bringing DC's youngest one step closer to healthier, smoke-free futures.

