

New Jersey may be second state to raise smoking age to 21

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TRENTON — New Jersey could become the second state to raise the smoking age to 21, as part of a movement that's been spurred in part by a major study released last year and a sharp increase in electronic cigarette use among young people.

The state's Legislature on Monday passed a bill that would fine retailers up to \$1,000 if they sell cigarettes or other tobacco products, including e-cigarettes that are often called "vapes," to anyone 20 years old or younger. The law wouldn't punish underage smokers.

It's unclear whether Gov. Chris Christie will sign it into law. He has until Jan. 19 to decide, and a spokesman declined to comment Tuesday on the governor's intentions. In 2014, the Republican presidential candidate vetoed a bill that passed with overwhelming support to extend a smoking ban to parks and public beaches, saying local municipalities should be able to decide.

Hawaii became the first state to raise the smoking age to 21 starting Jan. 1, and similar measures have been introduced in eight other states and the District of Columbia. Federal lawmakers have also proposed a nationwide smoking age of 21.

Rob Crane, president of the Ohio-based Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation, which supports the legislation said that so far it's been cities that have pushed the issue into the mainstream. New York City's law took effect in August 2014 and Boston's will change in February.

"This is a tipping point," Crane said of New Jersey joining in. "Midwestern cities like Cleveland and Kansas City have also joined. It's not just an East Coast or West Coast issue."

Lawmakers also cite last year's study from the Institute of Medicine that looked at the impact of raising the smoking age. The report projected that limiting sales to those 21 and older would result in about 249,000 fewer premature deaths for those born between 2000 and 2019.

Another oft-cited survey showed an almost 50 percent drop in smoking rates among high school students in Needham, Massachusetts, a town of nearly 30,000 that raised the age in 2005.

Meanwhile, the smoking rate among high school students nationally has fallen steadily in recent years, reaching about 9 percent among high schoolers in 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Advocates also point to the spike in the number of teens using electronic cigarettes. California and Hawaii have reported huge increases, with the latter seeing the rate of middle schoolers using e-cigs jump from 2 percent in 2011 to 12 percent in 2014.

Moses Heberlein, a 20-year-old from Ewing, doubts the change in New Jersey will impact him. He started at 16, three years before the legal age. Raising it to 21 would fail to stop him.

"I'm sure there are places out there that wouldn't question me," he said. "There were places in high school that never carded."

Veterans groups, including the American Legion, have also criticized such proposals, saying that service members willing to sacrifice their lives should have the right to choose to smoke. And some estimates predict that states like New Jersey will lose millions in tax revenue.

Carl Ortutay, who works at a tobacco shop in Lawrenceville, estimated that about a quarter of the shop's clientele would be affected by the change.

"But if they're going to smoke, they're going to smoke," he said. "Even if that means they're going to illegally do it."

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