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NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG DEPENDENCE, INC.

Tobacco Sales to Minors Reach All-Time Low in 2011

Tobacco sales to minors reached an all-time low last year, under a government inspection program aimed at reducing underage tobacco use.

Last year, 8.5 percent of retailers were willing to sell tobacco to minors, compared with 40 percent in 1997, the Associated Press reports. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) announced the rate is based on the results of random, unannounced checks to see if retailers would sell tobacco products to minors.

According to the latest U.S. Surgeon General's report, more needs to be done to keep youth and young adults from using tobacco. Almost 20 percent of high school-aged teens smoke, the report notes.

The retailer checks are part of the Synar Regulations program, a federal mandate that requires states to document that the rate of tobacco sales to minors is no more than 20 percent, or risk losing millions of dollars in federal funds for alcohol and drug abuse prevention and treatment services.

For the sixth year in a row, no state was out of compliance. Last year, 34 states reported less than 10 percent of retailers sold tobacco to minors. Oregon reported the highest rate, at 19.3 percent, while Nevada reported the lowest rate, at 1.1 percent.

"By reducing retail access, we're reducing one of the ways that kids can get introduced to tobacco and become smokers," said Susan Marsiglia Gray, who oversees the Synar Regulation program.

"As the recent Surgeon General's Report on Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults notes, smoking is the nation's leading cause of preventable death. We must pursue every opportunity to prevent kids and young adults of today from becoming life-long adult smokers of tomorrow," SAMHSA Administrator Pamela S. Hyde said in a news release. "The success of the Synar program is a testament to how preventing underage youth from gaining illegal access to tobacco products can have a tremendous impact."

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