

The Nicotine-Free Generation Initiative in Belchertown: A Community Effort for Public Health

The Belchertown Board of Health is proposing an evidence-based public health policy focused on reducing the use of nicotine products among our youth, building towards a healthier generation. This plan aims to curtail the sale of nicotine products to individuals born on or after January 1, 2004. By implementing this policy, Belchertown joins a growing number of communities in Massachusetts, across the nation, and around the world, in addressing nicotine addiction at its source—youth initiation.

Youth are especially vulnerable to nicotine addiction, with 95% of smokers starting before age 21 and the NFG policy seeks to disrupt this cycle. By preventing young people from even starting to use tobacco, a highly addictive substance, we are working to building a healthier future for our youth and town.

Belchertown's initiative follows the example set by nine other Massachusetts towns, and growing. The policy has also been implemented nationwide in countries such as the United Kingdom.

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court upheld the legality of the NFG policy earlier this year, solidifying its constitutionality and paving the way for broader adoption. Locally, the policy has garnered support from health coalitions, community groups, and youth organizations, including Belchertown's Helping Hands Youth Group.

The Rationale Behind a Nicotine-Free Generation

Tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, responsible for 480,000 deaths annually with over 9,000 of these deaths occurring in Massachusetts alone. Despite significant declines in smoking rates over the decades—from 42% in 1964 to less than 12% in 2022—the tobacco industry continues to innovate, targeting youth with flavored products and appealing marketing.

Understanding the Policy

The Nicotine-Free Generation concept is simple but powerful. It prohibits the sale of nicotine products, including cigarettes, vapes, and smokeless tobacco, to anyone born after January 1, 2025. Unlike traditional tobacco control measures that focus on specific age groups, NFG phases out nicotine sales over generations, effectively cutting off the pipeline of future smokers.

The policy focuses on regulating sales rather than personal behavior. This isn't about taking away rights, it is about protecting youth from addiction and its lifelong consequences. Current nicotine users retain their right to purchase these products, ensuring the policy's gradual and manageable implementation.

Economic and Social Impacts

A significant portion of money spent on tobacco products leaves the local economy. For example, if there are about 1,000 smokers in Belchertown spending an average of \$3,650 annually on cigarettes, that totals \$3.6 million per year. Redirecting even a fraction of this spending to local businesses would benefit our local businesses instead of going to Big Tobacco. Approximately 50% of the price of a pack of cigarettes is in the form of taxes, which does not remain in the community or benefit the store owner.

The average smoker consumes about 15 cigarettes per day, spending around \$10 daily or \$3,650 annually on cigarettes. With about 1,000 smokers in Belchertown, this amounts to over \$3.6 million per year, most of which goes to Big Tobacco instead of local businesses.

If 100 young people avoid smoking, they would collectively save \$365,000 annually, which could be spent on positive activities at our local businesses. Educating people about the financial benefits of quitting smoking can help many successfully quit.

The economic impact of NFG to the ten businesses in Belchertown that sell tobacco as only a part of their sales is expected to be minimal, as the gradual decline in tobacco sales allows retailers to adapt their

business models. Youth who use nicotine are a small percentage of local store's customers. Furthermore, reducing nicotine addiction could free up millions of dollars currently spent on smoking-related healthcare costs.

Addressing Concerns

Evidence suggests that restricting access to tobacco products works. In one Massachusetts town, when the minimum tobacco purchase age was raised from 18 to 21 in 2005, youth smoking rates declined by over 50%—a rate nearly three times higher than in neighboring towns.

NFG gradually reduces nicotine availability while maintaining access for current users. This approach avoids the creation of black markets and ensures a smooth transition.

Twice a year, compliance checks are made by the Pioneer Valley Tobacco Control Coalition in the ten stores in Belchertown to ensure that they are not selling cigarettes to anyone under 21. Unfortunately, half of them have failed these compliance checks.

Community Engagement and Education

Public education remains a cornerstone of Belchertown's strategy in addition to this policy. Local organizations such as the Pioneer Valley Tobacco Control Coalition and the Belchertown Overcoming Adversity Together (BOAT) coalition have been instrumental in raising awareness about the dangers of nicotine and the benefits of the NFG policy.

Youth involvement has also been critical. Helping Hands, a Belchertown student-led group, has vocally supported the initiative, highlighting its potential to protect future generations. According to Helping Hands members, many of their peers are already struggling with nicotine addiction, and the policy offers hope for a healthier future **for their generation**.

A Look Ahead

Belchertown's Board of Health is set to vote on the Nicotine-Free Generation policy on December 11, 2024 at a public hearing where they will take comments from the public. The agenda and link to the online meeting will be posted on the town's website www.belchertown.org under "Agendas and Minutes". If passed, the policy will go into effect on January 1, 2025, marking a significant milestone in the town's public health journey. The initiative represents not only a commitment to reducing smoking-related diseases but also a vision for a healthier, more resilient community.

This initiative underscores the importance of proactive, evidence-based public health measures that prioritize the well-being of future generations over the profits of the tobacco industry. As the town moves forward, it stands as a testament to what can be achieved when communities come together to address pressing health challenges.