

Contact:
ODMHSAS Communications
(405) 522-3907

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ILLEGAL TOBACCO SALES TO MINORS DOUBLE IN ONLY FOUR YEARS

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (ODMHSAS) has announced the results of its annual inspection of tobacco outlets to measure compliance with laws restricting underage tobacco sales. This year's non-compliance rate of 14.1 percent is more than twice the 6.8 percent recorded only four years ago, which was the lowest ever for the state.

Oklahoma retail outlets such as convenience and grocery stores are monitored to ensure they follow all laws prohibiting the sale of tobacco products to minors. Each year, hundreds of random checks are completed across the state through the agency's partnership with the state Alcoholic Beverage Laws Enforcement (ABLE) Commission. States must maintain a non-compliance rate below 20 percent regarding sale of tobacco products to minors or risk losing federal funding for substance abuse prevention and treatment efforts.

ODMHSAS Commissioner Terri White said she is concerned that non-compliance is increasing and that some retailers seem unconcerned about illegally selling tobacco products to minors.

"Store owners who ignore compliance requirements are putting their own profits ahead of our children's health," she said. "Fortunately, the vast majority of retailers are abiding by the law and aren't the ones putting tobacco into the hands of our youth. The fact that so many retailers didn't sell these products to minors suggests there is no excuse for the others to continue breaking the law."

The 2013 Oklahoma Youth Tobacco Survey notes that nine out of 10 smokers tried their first cigarette before age 18, and that 22.7 percent of Oklahoma high school students are current tobacco users.

Tobacco use prematurely kills thousands of Oklahomans every year, yet it remains a leading preventable cause of death. "The most effective way to stop future problems caused by tobacco use is to prevent it from ever occurring in the first place," White added.

In addition to health risks faced by tobacco users, White said the potential loss of federal substance abuse treatment funding would seriously impact already limited addiction treatment services. "Significant budget cuts have severely limited the services we can provide," she said. "Already, only about 20 percent of those needing substance abuse services receive the help they need."

Community-based education is available to business owners and clerks regarding youth access to tobacco. Additional information related to Synar compliance is available on the ODMHSAS website at http://ok.gov/odmhsas/Prevention/Prevention_Initiatives/Synar_Compliance/.

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