

Regulations aren't needed to stop underage smoking

No one wants kids to smoke. Not retailers, not cigarette manufacturers, not parents, teachers or public officials.

And while there is almost universal agreement on the goal, there is plenty of disagreement over how to reach it.

Some parties favor massive government intervention in the private sector. For example, in the name of preventing youth access to cigarettes, the Food and Drug Administration has issued regulations that would define cigarettes as a "medical device" and place severe restrictions on cigarette advertising and marketing.

In contrast, Carter Cos. (owners of 18 ASAP conveniences stores in the Kansas City area), the Kansas City Oil Marketers Association and the Convenience Store Association of Kansas believe that strict enforcement of current laws regarding the minimum age for the sale of cigarettes -- plus a concerted effort by the retail community to limit access at other points of sale -- can make a dramatic difference in reducing underage sales.

That is why these organizations are actively involved in the "We Card" program, which includes retail education and training efforts designed to encourage age verification through proper identification.

"We Card" provides free training and educational materials to retailers to help prevent the sale of tobacco products to

GUEST COLUMN

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underage customers. In addition to offering retailer training seminars, the program also supplies materials such as window decals, counter signs, lapel pins, a legal age purchase calendar, a customer tear pad explaining store policy, a training videotape and helpful hints on how to spot fake IDs.

When these organizations adopted "We Card," we did so because the retail and wholesale communities wanted to do everything we could to prevent tobacco sales to minors and because encouraging retailers to check ID just made sense.

Common sense tells us that if retailers routinely check the ID of potential cigarette purchasers, the number of underage sales can be reduced without the need for heavy-handed and intrusive government regulation.

Now common sense has been backed up by research. A study in California by the Public Health Foundation and the Behavioral Health Institute of California State University in San Bernardino County, reports that requests by merchants for minors' age and ID are associated with significantly lower rates of illegal sales to kids. How effective is checking ID? When age was asked, minors were refused ciga-

rettes 96 percent of the time.

To help other responsible retailers train their staffs to check ID, the Kansas Oil Marketers Association and the Convenience Store Retailers Association of Kansas are sponsoring a series of free "We Card" training seminars with help from the Kansas Food Dealers Association and Dillon Stores Inc. The seminars will be held in Overland Park (March 24), Topeka (March 25) Salina (March 26) and Wichita (March 27).

Interested retailers can register for one of these seminars by calling toll-free 1-800-TRAIN-03.

Last month, the Kansas Department of Revenue, Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control, recognized "We Card" as a Certified Training Program for retailers to use to comply with the Kansas minimum-age sales law. Kansas is the first state in the nation to grant this type of recognition. It is a tribute to the program's efforts to explain the law to retailers and their employees and to help them learn how to enforce it.

"We Card" was developed by the Coalition for Responsible Tobacco Retailing, whose membership includes the nation's largest retail and wholesale trade organizations. More than 320,000 "We Card" kits have been distributed to stores across the nation, and the program's distinctive red-and-yellow emblem, placed on doors, at cash registers and in other prominent locations, is becoming famil-

iar to everyone who enters their neighborhood store to make a tobacco purchase.

Now that the effectiveness of this common sense approach to asking for ID has been substantiated by research, it is time for those who advocate massive, and probably illegal, intrusion by the FDA into the activities of private business to do some rethinking.

While the court battles continue over whether the FDA has jurisdiction over tobacco products, ASAP stores, the Kansas Oil Marketers Association and the Convenience Store Association of Kansas will continue to work with elected officials, law enforcement, parents and others to keep tobacco out of the hands of kids.

These efforts can have a greater impact on reducing youth access to cigarettes and make an immediate difference on this issue without expanding federal bureaucracy.

The American people have made it clear that they're tired of excessive and unwarranted interference by government in their lives.

When the private sector is developing innovative solutions of its own, solutions of proven effectiveness, it makes no sense to add to the costly burden imposed by big government.

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