

Island stores are selling less tobacco to minors

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More merchants appear to be getting the message that it's against the law to sell tobacco to minors.

In random unannounced inspections in the past two months, merchants selling tobacco to minors dropped to 23 percent this year from 44 percent last year, said Elaine Wilson, head of the state Health Department's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division.

The latest results surpassed the state's goal to reduce illegal tobacco sales to 35 percent in 1997, Wilson said.

The overall goal is to bring tobacco sales to youths down to 20 percent by the year 2000.

But it will require continuing education and the efforts of individual store owners, parents and youths before all stores refuse to sell cigarettes to anyone under 18, health officials said.

"To have not only met the 1997 goal, but to have surpassed it and cut the percentage of stores doing illegal sales in half makes us hopeful that we can eliminate all store sales of tobacco to minors within the next couple years," Wilson said.

Of inspections conducted in June and July, 79 out of 343 stores, or 23 percent, were recorded sell-

ing tobacco to minors. A year ago, about 150 out of 339 stores, or 44.5 percent, sold to minors.

The rate of sales to minors prior to May/June 1996 show the need for continuing enforcement and education. Although the rate of sales dropped from 46 percent in December 1995/January 1996 to 16.5 percent a couple months later, the rate climbed back up to 44.5 percent in May/June 1996.

Officials attribute the short-term drop to the department's efforts to distribute informational materials and talk to store employees to make sure they understand the law and ensure their customers know about it too.

The recent inspections followed

stings conducted by teen volunteers and police statewide in which sellers were cited.

The stings and subsequent follow-ups are all part of Operation Kids Against Tobacco Sales — the Health Department's comprehensive approach to reducing teen smoking in Hawaii.

The department, in conjunction with the University of Hawaii Cancer Research Center, has been trying to "change the notion that it's OK to sell tobacco to kids," said Julian Lipsher, program coordinator of the Health Department's Tobacco Prevention and Education Project.

Ongoing programs involve educating not only merchants and

trade groups but students in the schools and parents and community groups.

The drop in sales to minors show their efforts are paying off. "I think we've got the people's attention," Lipsher said.

Store clerks caught selling tobacco to anyone under 18 face up to \$100 in fines, and up to \$1,000 for subsequent violations.

"If we don't do anything, it will go back up," said Professor Karen Glanz of the University of Hawaii's Cancer Research Center.

Publicity on a new Federal Drug Administration regulation, stricter regulations on tobacco advertising and the excise tax increase on tobacco sales have con-

tributed to public awareness and have played a major role in cutting back sales to minors, Glanz said.

Large corporations particularly are taking notice. Glanz recalled walking into a Longs Drugs store shortly after the federal law went into effect this year requiring stores to check the identification of customers, 27-years-old or younger, purchasing tobacco. Signs were posted prominently in the store tactfully asking customers to comply with the new law, she said.

Lawmakers this past Legislative session also made it harder for teens to buy cigarettes by increasing the excise tax on tobacco to 9 cents this year, from 60 cents, and to \$1 a pack next year.