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For Immediate Release

Local Youth are Bombarded by Kid-Friendly Tobacco and Alcohol Products

Today, throughout California, results were released from a scientific survey on tobacco, alcohol, and nutrition in California stores. This survey was the largest of its kind. In Santa Barbara County, there were concerning findings including an alarming spike in the availability of electronic cigarettes.

Since 2013, the availability of e-cigarettes has increased by 68%. Couple this with data from local youth surveys showing that on average 14% of teens in high school use electronic smoking devices. Studies have shown that teens using these products are 2-8 times more likely to smoke traditional cigarettes. This finding is part of new research released today on the availability and marketing of tobacco products, alcohol, condoms and healthy and unhealthy food options in California stores that sell tobacco products.

This survey builds upon research conducted in fall of 2013 and provides insights into changes in the availability and marketing of the studied products. Information was collected in the summer of 2016 from more than 7,100 stores in all 58 California counties including pharmacies, supermarkets, delis, convenience and liquor stores and also in tobacco-only stores. In Santa Barbara, 46% of retail outlets were visited.

Dr. Charity Dean, MD, MPH, Health Officer, Santa Barbara County Public Health Department, says, *“In order to make the healthy choice the easy choice, there needs to be a better balance of healthy options in our stores. When healthy choices like fruits and vegetables win, we all win.”*

Key findings for Santa Barbara County are detailed by health topic below:

Tobacco – Three out of four stores sell youth-targeted tobacco products priced as low as two for 99 cents, in flavors such as grape and strawberry. This means tobacco products are cheaper than the average candy bar. This blatant target-marketing towards youth is of serious concern. Additionally there has been a 37% increase in the last three years in the availability of these products (from 56% in 2013 to 75% in 2016). Representatives from youth-serving agencies are dismayed at this finding, including Executive Director of Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley, Edwin Weaver, who says, “These are starter products for our young people. This marketing is predatory and unacceptable.”

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Alcohol – Nearly one-third of youth under the age of 15 have used alcohol, raising local concerns about access to these products and their impact on underage drinking. Alcopops, alcoholic beverages that mimic soda and appeal to underage drinkers, are available in 82% of stores surveyed. Of additional concern, 28% of these products are sold right next to soda. Further, in our county, over 45% of stores advertise alcohol near candy/toys and at a child’s eye level, which exceeds both regional and state rates.

Nutrition – Recent statewide and local research shows that over half of adults in Santa Barbara County are obese or overweight and 9% of local adults have been diagnosed with diabetes. Lack of access to fruits and vegetables continues to be an issue, with only 40% of stores carrying any fresh fruits or vegetables, a decrease of 14% over the past three years. Additionally, ease of access and placement of sugary drinks at checkout continues to remain high at 60%, significantly higher than the state average.

Condom Availability – New for the 2016 survey, stores’ availability of condoms was assessed; 60.8% of stores in Santa Barbara County allow customers access to condoms without speaking to a clerk, a common deterrent from purchasing. While considerably higher than the state average of 37%, safe sex practices are a growing concern for public health officials given the high rates of gonorrhea, chlamydia and syphilis in our county.

Other Findings – Roughly 41% of pharmacies surveyed sell tobacco products, a disconcerting statistic when considering the vital role of pharmacies in the promotion of health and wellness. This percentage is also higher than both regional and state rates that range from 33% to 37%. The data also points to some positive indicators. Since the last survey, there was a 39% increase in healthy storefront ads and a significant drop in alcohol advertisements.

Local health officials see stores as their partners in creating a healthier retail environment as evidenced by one new project in the Santa Ynez Valley. The Healthy Stores Healthy Valley promotes health and wellness by rewarding local markets for offering healthier retail options.

Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community (HSHC) is a campaign spearheaded by the California Tobacco Control Program that linked statewide and local prevention partners to improve the health of Californians by informing them about the impact of unhealthy product availability and marketing in the retail environment. For county-specific, regional and state data on these and more information on HSHC, please visit www.healthystoreshealthycommunity.com.

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