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Survey Finds Sharp Increase in Availability of E-Cigarettes in Santa Cruz County

(SANTA CRUZ, CA) March 8, 2017 – New research shows that in Santa Cruz County the availability of e-cigarettes has grown 67% since 2013. 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.

Today, throughout California, health advocates held 13 press events to release results of the scientific survey, which is the largest of its kind. It builds upon initial research released three years ago in March 2014 and provides insights into changes in the availability and marketing of the studied products during this time. 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 as well as tobacco-only stores.

“Overall, the findings show a continuing and alarming discrepancy in our county in the accessibility and marketing between products that promote a healthy lifestyle, and those that don’t,” said Dr. Arnold Leff, Health Officer for Santa Cruz County. “Stores play a critical role in our community’s health, and this survey shows offerings and messaging are out of balance, tipping heavily toward unhealthy options. Our goal is to help re-calibrate the balance toward health.”

The survey found the following for Santa Cruz County:

- In addition to selling cigarettes, 49% of stores sell “little cigars” or cigarillos, but only 30% of stores sold fresh fruits or vegetables. Furthermore, 87% of those stores sold a popular brand of “little cigars” individually for under a dollar, less than the cost of a candy bar.
- 40% of stores sold non- or low-fat milk, but 80% sell alcohol.
- 72% of surveyed stores sell condoms, but only 39% sell them on unlocked shelves.
- E-cigarettes saw a significant increase in Santa Cruz County stores from the last time this survey was conducted, up more than 67%.

“The expanded availability of e-cigarettes is of particular concern and reflects the spike in use by teens and young adults in the last three years,” said Gina Cole, Chair of the Santa Cruz County Tobacco Education Coalition (TEC), a program of the Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency. The TEC is a non-profit partnership that promotes a tobacco-free lifestyle and environment.

Another goal was to examine the accessibility and marketing of healthy and unhealthy products to youth.

“This survey found that our community’s youth are inundated with unhealthy messages and choices. We need to change what information and options our kids are exposed to and work to surround them with healthy choices and messaging instead,” said Cole.

The survey found the following for Santa Cruz County:

- Only 10% of stores advertised healthy products on their storefronts, but 65% of storefronts advertised unhealthy products. 67% of stores near schools have storefront advertising for unhealthy products.
- 16% of stores place tobacco products or ads in kid-friendly locations, such as tobacco ads at ‘kid-level’ (three feet or below) or tobacco products near candy or toys.
- 9% of stores placed alcohol ads at “kid-level” or near kid-friendly items such as candy or toys.
- 63% of stores sell flavored non-cigarette tobacco products, which often have kid-appealing flavors such as grape, watermelon, chocolate, gummy candies and even breakfast cereals. Similarly, 60% of stores near schools also sell flavored tobacco products.

“The Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency is committed to continuing to work with local health advocates and partners to provide accurate information and help make the healthy choice the easy choice for Californians,” Leff said.

Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community is a statewide campaign formed by tobacco prevention, nutrition, alcohol abuse prevention and sexually transmitted disease (STD) prevention partners collaborating to improve the health of Californians by informing them about the impact of unhealthy product availability and marketing in the retail environment.

“In Santa Cruz County, we’re working to decrease youth access to e-cigarettes and other flavored tobacco products through Tobacco Retail Licenses, which I am pleased to say that four of the five jurisdictions have adopted,” said Cole. “We are also working directly with youth to educate them about the dangers of emerging tobacco products targeted to youth.”

For state and county-specific data and more information on Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community, please visit www.healthystoreshealthycommunity.com.