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### Healthy options, better choices Countywide report on availability of unhealthy products most alarming for youth

By **Evan Tuchinsky**

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When Abbey Korte checks social media and sees someone she knows smoking, she doesn't appreciate the photo or video the way some teens might.

That peer isn't edgy, glamorous, mature or cool. That peer is a victim.

"They think that it's their choice to smoke, but it isn't in reality it was the advertising targeting them—targeting us—that made the choice," she said a group of health professionals and media assembled at the Chico Elks Lodge last Wednesday (March 8).

Korte, 16, is a junior at Chico High School who participates in a club called KLEAN: Kids Leading Everyone Against Nicotine. This was her first public presentation on behalf of the group, made during an event organized by the Butte County Public Health Department to announce the findings in a retail survey conducted under the auspices of a statewide program, Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community. Following up on an initial report from 2014, surveyors logged the availability of products in neighborhood stores.

The numbers that most alarm county public health officials relate to youth.

It's twice as easy to find fruit-flavored tobacco and alcohol than actual fruit, based on the proportion of stores that carry cigars/and/or e-cigs versus produce (see infographic). Cigarettes are small cigars, packaged brightly, that can cost less than candy; e-cigs are sugary beverages also aimed at younger consumers.

Also, as the popularity of electronic cigarettes has skyrocketed, so has availability. E-cigs are now the tobacco product teens use most and over three-fourths of Butte County stores carry them, a jump of nearly a third from three years ago.

"It's hard to make a healthy choice when the unhealthy option is so much closer," Korte said, adding: "I don't want to be targeted so someone can make money by killing my lungs."

**Korte's passion is personal.** As a young child she suffered from asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia. Her condition was serious enough that she had to take preventative measures.

Speaking with the CN&R after her presentation, she shared that she retains "these vivid memories" of herself as a 5- or 6-year-old sitting in the car in front of a store where people were smoking outside. Her mother would tell Korte to inhale before heading to the entrance and exhale only once inside.

"I'd hold my breath, and if I even got a little whiff of that smoke, it would just [trigger a] coughing fit," she said. "I couldn't breathe."

That sensation—heaviness, fright—"kind of stuck with me," she continued, even after she outgrew her asthma. She's gone on to play volleyball and basketball and lead an active life, but moments of literal breathlessness remain embedded in her psyche.

"I still take that precaution even now," Korte said. "When I see someone [smoking], I try to hold my breath, it's just kind of habit, because I don't want that in my lungs."

She has a better understanding of why others put smoke in their lungs since joining KLEAN. She heard about the group while in another Chico High club, Interact (affiliated with Rotary), and felt inspired to confront tobacco.

Her friends don't smoke, partly out of sensitivity to her, but acquaintances do. And while it can be difficult for teens to challenge one another about their choices, she feels she can impact her peers positively through social media.

"The people that I know that smoke, I don't know that they know the risks," Korte said.

**Young people such as Korte represent lynchpins** in promoting healthy choices.

Public health professionals need allies to compete with the well-oiled campaigns of advertisers.

"That's where groups like KLEAN come in," said Sherry Morgado, assistant director of Butte County Public Health. "We need youth talking to their peers, using social media, using all of the platforms kids use these days to get those messages out there—and having the youth themselves developing those messages, because they know what speaks to them."

In addition, children influence parents' household decisions. What the family eats obviously relates to what the family buys. The study examines supply; there's also demand.

On that front, Butte County Public Health performs outreach in classrooms. Miranda Johnson, supervisor of public education, works through SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) to inform students about what constitutes healthful eating.

"Over \$1 million an hour is being spent advertising soda and chips and all sorts of unhealthy products, and a large portion is [targeted] toward our youth," Johnson said. "The parents are not going to only purchase things that the children are not going to want to eat; if we can influence the children to make better choices, it also will influence the parents to make healthier purchases."

Johnson said it's important not to demonize stores—predominantly local businesses in Butte County, including actual mom-and-pop operations.

"We recognize that we all play a part in [what's sold]: the consumer, the producer, all of us," she continued. "So we all have to work together to make a change. The retailer aren't going to change if we don't pressure them also to change as a community, that we want the healthier products in the stores so that we can purchase them."



Abbey Korte, member of the Chico High club that confronts tobacco use, sees social media as a double-edged sword, an avenue for getting out information but also where teens glorify smoking. PHOTO BY EVAN TUCHINSKY

**Key findings**

Among Butte County grocery, liquor, and convenience stores:

- 95.3 percent sell flavored tobacco, including cigars.
- 84.4 percent sell alcohol.
- 78 percent sell e-cigarettes.
- 42.9 percent sell fresh produce.
- 39 percent sell low/no-fat milk.

[www.healthystoresforahealthycommunity.com](http://www.healthystoresforahealthycommunity.com)

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