



**POINT OF VIEW:  
PASSAGE OF SENATE BILL 1256 VITAL TO THE HEALTH OF  
OKLAHOMA**

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Passage of Senate Bill 1256, legislation concerning youth access to tobacco, is vital to Oklahoma's future.

Senate Bill 1256 – “Improving Compliance with Laws and Regulations on Tobacco Sales to Minors” – recently passed through the Senate with a unanimous vote of 44-0. The bill is set to be heard on the House Floor next week as the final step before being sent to the governor. Despite compelling reasons for its passage, there has been speculation the tobacco industry and a few lobbyists are mobilizing to defeat this bill.

The bill would strengthen compliance with laws concerning sales of tobacco to minors by assessing stricter penalties and other restrictions on stores that *repeatedly* sell tobacco products to those under age 18.

If the bill fails, the state stands to lose millions of dollars in federal funding related to the “Synar Amendment,” which regulates the sale of tobacco to minors.

Presently, more than 40 percent of Oklahoma middle school students report using tobacco on a regular basis – not an encouraging statistic. Approximately 90 percent of adult smokers began smoking before age 18 and nearly 10,000 high school

students become regular, daily smokers every year in Oklahoma – the equivalent of one classroom per day. Roughly one out of three of these young smokers will die early as a direct result of starting this deadly habit.

For the health of our future generations, it is important to restrict access to tobacco products to our youth.

Senate Bill 1256 would help do this.

Proposed legislation solidifies language penalizing store owners and includes a number of other measures to reduce youth access to tobacco, such as temporary tobacco sales license suspensions to store owners for repeated violations; eliminating “self-service” tobacco displays within stores; and adding county law enforcement officers to the list of individuals that may conduct compliance audits.

Over the past five years, Oklahoma has been in compliance with the federal Synar Amendment only one time, only avoiding losing millions of federal dollars because a small margin of error is allowed in the compliance calculations. It is important to remain vigilant about the sale of tobacco to youth to avoid sliding back into non-compliance.

Senate Bill 1256 is not “anti-business,” as some opponents say. It does nothing more than strengthen existing laws prohibiting retail outlets, such as convenience and grocery stores, from selling tobacco to minors. Store owners who sell tobacco need to do so responsibly and that means following the law. Store owners who have continued difficulty with compliance essentially are putting profits ahead of our children’s health.

In Oklahoma, tobacco use causes the premature death of about 6,000 of our friends, neighbors and loved ones each year. Given tobacco’s devastating effects on

teens and their ensuing adult health, it's critical that we address the issue of youth access to tobacco.

Prevention is key. It's much easier to prevent smoking than it is to get people to stop once they've established a lifelong habit.

Passage of Senate Bill 1256 would help in that effort – for the future health of all Oklahomans.

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This letter represents the viewpoint of the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth, which includes the following members: Tammy Jo Bachman, Oklahoma Bar Association; Howard Hendrick, director, Department of Human Services; Michael Crutcher, commissioner, Oklahoma Department of Health; John Linehan, governor's office; Bart Bouse, youth-serving agencies; Joseph P. Marak, Jr., associate district judge; Darlene Callahan, court-appointed special advocates association; Linda S. Parker, director, Department of Rehabilitation Services; Robert E. "Gene" Christian, Oklahoma District Attorney's Council; Amy Sparks, appointee of the President Pro Tempore; Terry Cline, commissioner, Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services; Ann Taylor, appointee of the Speaker of the House of Representatives; Richard DeLaughter, director, Office of Juvenile Affairs; Linda Terrell, community partnership boards; Daniel Dirk, post-adjudication review boards; Brent Thackerson, Oklahoma children's agencies and residential enterprises; Mike Fogarty, director, Oklahoma Health Care Authority; and Sandy Garrett, state superintendent of public instruction, Department of Education.