

campaign for a smoke-free alberta

- News Release -

Friday, October 2, 2015

COALITION CALLS FOR TOBACCO TAX INCREASE TO REDUCE YOUTH TOBACCO USE AND AFFORDABILITY

Minimum wage increase will make tobacco even more affordable for many Alberta youth

A coalition of prominent health organizations is urging the Notley government to reduce youth tobacco use and affordability through a significant tobacco tax increase in the fall 2015 provincial budget. Alberta continues to have the [most affordable cigarettes in Canada](#) despite a modest tax increase of 50 cents per 20 pack of cigarettes that was announced last spring by the Prentice government.

The Campaign for a Smoke-Free Alberta is also concerned about the potential for the [increase in Alberta's minimum wage](#) to make cigarettes even more affordable for many youth. A significant tobacco tax increase will offset the impact of a higher minimum wage.

“The Notley government has a huge opportunity to significantly reduce youth smoking with the most powerful weapon available—a tobacco tax increase” said Leigh Allard of The Lung Association of Alberta/NWT. “The new government must reverse the previous government’s destructive policy of maintaining the most affordable cigarettes in Canada. Alberta has fallen so far behind other provinces that a tax increase of one dollar per pack of cigarettes is needed just to move up one notch from last place in terms of relative affordability”.

It only takes 34 minutes of labour for Alberta youth aged 15 to 24 to purchase a pack of 20 cigarettes compared with 40 minutes in B.C. and 42 minutes in Saskatchewan. A tax increase of \$1.00 per pack of 20 cigarettes in Alberta would increase the purchase price to 38 minutes of labour and would move Quebec to last place where youth require 36 of labour to purchase 20 cigarettes.

“The increase in minimum wage will make tobacco even more affordable for many Alberta youth” said Dan Holinda of the Canadian Cancer Society, Alberta/NWT Division. “The minimum wage increase should be coupled with a tobacco tax increase to ensure that youth smoking rates don’t rise. We are not opposed to the increase in minimum wage but a corresponding tobacco tax increase is needed to ensure that tobacco doesn’t become even more affordable. Alberta’s minimum wage hike shouldn’t compromise the health of young people and leave tobacco companies laughing all the way to the bank.”

According to the World Bank and the World Health Organization, every 10 percent increase in the price of cigarettes reduces youth consumption by 6 to 12 percent. Youth are more price-sensitive than adults due to their limited disposable income.

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“As long as the Alberta government maintains the most affordable cigarettes in Canada we will continue to fight youth smoking with one hand tied behind our back” said Les Hagen of Action on Smoking & Health (ASH). “There is irrefutable evidence that tax increases reduce youth smoking. We urge the Notley government to reverse this harmful and objectionable policy with a major tobacco tax increase as soon as possible. Any government that maintains the most affordable cigarettes in Canada is giving a leg up to a rogue industry whose products maim and kill thousands of Albertans each year. This is the worst example of corporate welfare that I can imagine. We hope that Notley government will put an end to this destructive policy. Alberta youth deserve first-class protection from tobacco”.

The coalition is also urging the Notley government to dedicate at least \$20 million of any new tobacco revenue toward effective strategies to further reduce youth smoking and to help smokers quit.

“The Alberta Tobacco Reduction Strategy is woefully underfunded and remains largely unimplemented as [the Premier has acknowledged](#)” said Leigh Allard. “The Notley government can demonstrate its full commitment to tobacco reduction by applying a portion of any new tobacco revenue to effective measures to help keep kids tobacco-free and to help smokers quit. Polls show that more Albertans will support a tobacco tax increase if a portion of the revenue is applied to tobacco reduction initiatives. The Alberta government can raise \$180 million to improve the health of Albertans just by reducing our tobacco affordability from dead-last place to second-last place in front of Quebec.”

A tax increase of \$1.00 per 20 pack of cigarettes—coupled with proportional tax increases on other tobacco products—is expected to raise about \$180 million in new revenue.

Alberta’s minimum wage will increase from \$10.20 per hour to \$11.20 per hour on October 1. The Notley government has pledged to raise minimum wages to \$15.00 dollars per hour by 2018.

According to the latest Canadian Youth Smoking, Tobacco and Drug Survey conducted in 2012/2013, there are roughly 39,000 youth tobacco users in grades 6 to 12 in Alberta. Tobacco is the leading avoidable cause of disease, disability and premature mortality—resulting in 3,000 deaths annually in Alberta.

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“Alberta should not be straggling in after other provinces on these matters. We should be setting the agenda in smart ways to ensure good health for Albertans”

“a good government would increase the investment in tobacco reduction actions from what is currently a million dollars per year so that the rates of use in the province would drop far more”

-Rachel Notley, [Alberta Hansard](#), October 25, 2010