



Case Study

Community Campaigns to Reduce Youth Access to Tobacco Products in Colton, CA

Coalition sustains momentum over a long period to secure a comprehensive tobacco retail license policy.

Executive Summary

Colton Community Coalition for Change (Coalition), a community outreach program of Mental Health Systems Central Valley Prevention Program (MHS), and its community partners spent nearly two-and-a-half years cultivating support for a comprehensive Tobacco Retail License (TRL) policy for the City of Colton. The lengthy campaign overcame several roadblocks before a TRL policy was adopted in December 2019, including delays and leadership changes both among the coalition members and political leadership in Colton, illustrating the powerful roles of community partnerships and youth voices.

Key Campaign Elements

Collecting Data, Building Community Capacity

From the onset, the Coalition had strong community support, but its campaign stalled for several months due to staff turnover at supporting agencies, hampering its ability to collect data that would move the campaign forward and keep supporters engaged.

"All we could do was encourage them to continue to be vigilant and collect [testimonials], anecdotal information and keep the conversation going," said Mirza Andrade-Martinez, Prevention Specialist, Mental Health Systems Central Valley Prevention Program.

In March 2018, five months after voting to pursue a campaign, the Coalition was finally able to conduct surveys to gauge local sentiment about youth tobacco access and support for additional controls on tobacco sales. Because data collection teams had remained engaged, the work was completed quickly, generating 250 completed surveys within two weeks.

The Coalition used the survey results to build additional support across the community through a comprehensive program of presentations at community centers, churches, Coalition meetings, youth soccer leagues and parent groups. Presentations were also given to school-based

groups focused on non-English speaking families, which represent a significant portion of the Colton community.

Underage youth tobacco purchase operations conducted in July 2018 provided additional key data to support the need for tighter controls. Among 46 tobacco retailers, 32% sold tobacco products to minors.

Maria-Ximena, a young adult champion, said "...It was surprising to see how easy it was to get access to flavored tobacco products. Many tobacco retailers sold to minors and these products...were easily accessible to youth in Colton, within walking distance."

Identifying Support

In November 2017, the Coalition partnered with Mental Health Systems, California Health Collaborative San Bernardino County Tobacco Control Program (CHC), and the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free San Bernardino County. As the campaign moved forward, other partners joined the effort, including the American Lung Association, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, Coalition for a Tobacco-Free San Bernardino County, and Relay for Life.

With data in hand, identifying potential policy support was key. In August 2018, Coalition members – including youth who participated in the underage tobacco purchase operations – met with Colton Mayor Richard DeLaRosa and Councilmember Frank J. Navarro to share data collected and information about the problem of underage tobacco purchases within the city. The response from the Mayor and Councilmember was positive, indicating the need to find a solution with particular attention paid to youth and their day-to-day experiences around tobacco in school settings and among peers.

"Rain or shine the youth came, they were involved in assessing the problem, collected public opinion polls, participated in focus groups, community forums and presentations, they participated in minor decoy operations, met with elected officials to report findings, and showed up for public comment over and over to tell their story at City Council meetings,"

-- Mirza Andrade-Martinez, Prevention Specialist, Mental Health Systems Central Valley Prevention Program

"Youth was key," said Addison J. Saenz, former Program Manager at the California Health Collaborative – San Bernardino County Tobacco Control. "These Councilmembers were huge on youth involvement and they wanted to hear about it from the youth directly because they are the people most affected."

Leveraging Youth Voices

Recognizing the strong impact that youth voices had already provided the campaign, the Coalition conducted focus groups with at-risk youth during Fall 2018, building additional data assets that could be used to continue building community awareness and support.

With new Councilmembers in place, youth and adult Coalition members met with key people during December and January, including two Councilmembers identified as potential champions and a school district official. The presentations were led by youth, this time relaying concise materials, following feedback that the thick, detailed packet distributed during the August 2018 meeting had been shelved rather than shared. The presentations included a demonstration of how easily vaping devices could be hidden during use, appearing in some cases as a standard USB plug-in.

In January 2019, the Coalition sought support to make a case for a comprehensive Tobacco Retail License policy during the February 2019 council meeting. Several Coalition youth members shared their stories and involvement with the Tobacco Control Program.

Broadening the Support Base

Meetings with key community leaders led the Coalition to hone its efforts to secure support from other key voices that could bolster their case for the TRL with the police department being one of the new non-traditional stakeholders.

MHS conducted a community forum in June 2019 called Living in Good Health Tobacco-Free (L.I.G.H.T) to raise awareness around the issue of underage tobacco purchases in the city. A highlight of the event included a broad audience of community members, health organizations and city agencies that underscored the broad concern about the problem of youth access to tobacco. For example, a public pledge of support for a solution was made by the Colton Police Department, which had also conducted an underage tobacco purchase survey that further validated the problem of youth access.

Representative of the Colton Joint Unified School District were also present, recognizing the role of schools in protecting youth from tobacco. The event featured youth presentations as well as panels with the American Lung Association, California Health Collaborative and the American Cancer Society.

The public support from the Colton Police Department also proved important for bolstering community support.

“It was really important for the community to see that local law enforcement saw it was an issue and supported their efforts,” said Patricia Lopez, Program

Coordinator for CHC. “It got them more excited that they had even more support for the issue.”

For CHC, the L.I.G.H.T. Forum demonstrated the valuable role such community events can play in bolstering support.

“We learned (community forums) are very effective in getting the message across, especially if we’re strategic about who is in the room,” said Monika Gracian, Program Manager for the California Health Collaborative’s San Bernardino County Tobacco Control Program.

Letting the Community Take the Lead

The Coalition leadership’s deep ties to the community were crucial in guiding campaign decision making at pivotal moments.

“They knew their city and they knew what worked,” Lopez said.

Gracian said the strong community support required agencies to be more flexible with their technical assistance to meet the needs of the community.

“We had a lot of late-night community meetings and youth meetings and weekend events,” she said.

Moving the Tobacco Retail License Policy Forward

In September 2019, the Mayor directed City staff to draft the TRL policy. From there, the TRL proposal received its first of two required readings in October 2019 and received unanimous support from the city council. Councilmembers commended youth coalition members for their persistence and dedication to the issue, adding that their involvement meant the issue could no longer be ignored.

"These were kids who went to Colton High School and did the underage tobacco purchase surveys," Gracian said. "They had all the first-hand accounts and stories to share with the council and that really had an impact on the members."

Coalition youth members maintained the drumbeat of support, participating in a regional MHS-sponsored "Escape the Vape" Event in October 2019, which drew participation from school districts, public safety officers, school officials and at least one Colton City Councilmember.

During the next several weeks, CHC provided a model policy to MHS and the Coalition to share with Colton City staff for their consideration in the drafting of the final version of the TRL in November 2019. MHS continued its outreach with Colton PD and in the community, working with Coalition members to maintain their focus on the issue and continue to distribute information through community meetings and one-on-one interactions.

During this time period, the issue of teen vaping was garnering widespread media attention in California and across the nation due to the epidemic of use and the death of several people linked to vaping. On Sept. 16, 2019, a state-level executive order was signed requiring stores selling vaping devices to post warnings about the health risks and directing the California Department of Public Health to launch a \$30 million media ad campaign to warn about the dangers of vaping. This action helped to further illustrate the urgency of creating stronger controls to prevent youth access to tobacco products.

The TRL proposal was adopted Nov. 5, 2019. Additional measures related to a supporting fee structure passed Nov. 19, 2019, taking effect 30 days later. Retailers were given 60 days to apply for and secure their tobacco retailer license.

Isaac T. Suchil, Mayor Pro Tem District 6, said the issue was important to the overall community.

"...Listening to some of our youth that are out there, there is so much we do not know about the impact of these products specifically the vaping and flavor tobacco," he said. "Cigarette companies are targeting our kids in their advertising and getting them hooked on addictive nicotine products, but we need to take action to protect our Colton youth and prevent them from becoming the next generation getting addicted to these products."

Another supporter, Dr. Luis S. Gonzalez, Councilmember for District 4, lauded the youth Coalition members for their efforts.

"It is clear that all of the students involved want to make our community a better place," Gonzalez said. "And in doing so, they want to protect and safeguard our youth, which are their own colleagues."

Sustaining Implementation Support, Overcoming Retailer Challenges

With the TRL policy approved, the Coalition began organizing a campaign to support its implementation.

During the early part of 2020, MHS worked with Coalition youth to produce videos highlighting their personal stories and work on the project to be shared across social media. The Coalition also returned to City Council in February 2020 to congratulate the City for being recognized as a "City on the Rise" in the American Lung Association's State of Tobacco Control California 2020 report.

All the while, opposition began to build from a small group of retailers. They opposed the TRL's prohibition of tobacco retail sales within 1,000 feet of youth sensitive areas, along with closures and restrictions set into motion due to COVID-19

beginning March 2020, resulting in additional delays to implementation. MHS and Coalition members continued to engage local leaders about the importance of the policy as approved. In August 2020, the council provided exemptions to a handful of existing retailers unable to comply with the 1,000 feet minimum distance from youth sensitive areas.

In response, the Coalition has continued to plan activities to support implementation, including minor

decoy operations and a recognition program for retailers in compliance.

COVID-19 meant Facebook Live, recorded YouTube videos and other digital platforms replaced traditional community-building efforts, forcing coalitions to “rethink everything to continue momentum and engagement in a digital setting,” Gracian said.

Challenges, Success, and Lessons Learned

There were a number of factors contributing to campaign challenges and successes.

The role of community engagement doesn't stop once the ordinance is adopted. Community engagement plays a significant role to support sustained implementation and impacting change in social norms. It also proved crucial for maintaining support in the face of legislative challenges. The Coalition maintained communication with the campaign champion and community supporters, ensuring its place at the table when challenges to some legislation components arose after its approval.

Non-traditional stakeholders proved instrumental including support from law enforcement and school officials. The campaign was launched in response to concerns brought by the community to the Coalition and driven by its commitment for change. Results of decoy operations by local law enforcement and support from the Colton Police Department for the TRL provided additional validation and urgency to the issue of youth access to tobacco in the community. Letters of support from the local school board also provided an important voice of support.

Youth voices were key. Both in initial meetings with City leaders, and in City Council presentations, the perspective of youth coalition members as they shared experiences of tobacco use among their

peers and at school left a strong impression that reinforced the urgency of measures to prevent youth access to tobacco. Maintaining youth voices requires steady engagement, to avoid losing key voices as youth “age out” or move from the community following graduation.

Andrade-Martinez said nurturing strong relationships with parents of youth members is also crucial to developing trust and commitment over a complex campaign. “You need to know more about their background and culture...we’re very respectful of their family values and the way things need to be approved by parents for youth to participate, and always be ready to provide information about what the youth are going to do,” she said.

Data tells the story. Survey results collected during a series of presentations at community centers, churches, Coalition meetings, youth soccer leagues and parent groups reflected strong community concern about youth access to tobacco products. Youth tobacco purchase operations helped illustrate the problem, revealing 32% of local retail sold tobacco products to youth.

Timing proved a significant factor. Staff turnover at partner agencies led to delays to developing key

supporting materials, including a survey of community sentiment on youth tobacco access and retailer controls. The delays pushed initial meetings with local government leaders too close to a municipal election, leading decision makers to postpone taking up the issue until new city leadership, including new Councilmembers and a

new mayor, were in place. The delays also lengthened the overall campaign, ultimately requiring added engagement efforts. The Coalition held additional training sessions and events to sustain and broaden community support and maintain campaign momentum.