



CASE STUDY: SAN DIEGANS VS. BIG TOBACCO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Diegans VS. Big Tobacco was launched in spring 2021 after the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids conducted a community assessment that showed strong support for the state law that was passed in 2020 and eliminates the sale of nearly all flavored tobacco. The biggest driver of tobacco use among youth is the flavored e-cigarettes that are aggressively marketed by the Tobacco Industry with enticing flavors such as bubble gum, cotton candy, popcorn and hundreds of others. The goal of the campaign was to pass a local ordinance to end the sale of flavored tobacco products in the City of San Diego. At the time, the newly passed state flavors law was on hold awaiting a referendum vote in November 2022. Voters, by nearly a two-thirds vote ratified the state law, Proposition 31. The proposed San Diego flavors ordinance would serve as an insurance policy in case the statewide initiative was unsuccessful.

The campaign was able to use compelling visuals during public events and powerful statistics – such as local survey results that showed that more than 40% of local high schoolers have used an electronic vapor product– to garner support from the community. But the coalition also ran into a number of challenges including disagreement on whether hookah should be

included in their deal breakers, as the initial policy that was widely viewed as lacking teeth and opposition by local retailers and the hookah industry.

APPROACH

Unlike the vast majority of local tobacco policy campaigns, San Diegans VS. Big Tobacco benefitted from significant financial resources from the Tobacco Free-Kids Action Fund. With these resources, the campaign was able to work with a local consulting firm and a local tobacco policy advocate to help form a coalition of local and national organizations interested in ensuring San Diego would pass a progressive policy restricting the sale of flavored tobacco. It's important to note that the Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund's resources were used on lobbying-related activities, while other organizations in the coalition, such as those funded by state tobacco tax dollars, engaged exclusively in non-lobbying activities.

The coalition, which includes members who can engage in lobbying activities, met weekly to hear updates from the consulting team and local tobacco policy advocates, who helped set up meetings with council members to discuss

THE COALITION INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS:

- Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund
- SAY San Diego
- American Heart Association
- American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
- American Lung Association in California
- African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- San Ysidro Health
- Family Health Centers of San Diego
- San Diego County Medical Society
- San Diego Pediatricians for Clean Air
- Sierra Club, San Diego Chapter
- United Women of East Africa
- Samahan Health Centers
- Project A.W.A.R.E.
- Parents Against Vaping E-Cigs

the ordinance. The campaign also partnered with City Councilmember, Marni von Wilpert, who was instrumental in advocating for the policy with local elected leaders. Once the core coalition was in place, the group began outreach to nontraditional stakeholders, including faith and immigrant communities, schools, community health centers and environmental organizations. These groups were able to rally support from within their own members, turning out crowds at council meetings and demonstrating the broad appeal of the proposed policy to elected leaders.

“The students, doctors, environmental groups... the breadth and scope of the coalition and the amount of support from a wide variety of stakeholders lent a lot of support to it,” said Cynthia Knapp, program manager at SAY San Diego, one of the founding members of the San Diegans VS. Big Tobacco Campaign.

DEMONSTRATING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

One of the biggest initial challenges the campaign faced was convincing San Diegans that vaping among young people was a pressing issue that should be addressed by local lawmakers. The campaign began by surveying teens to find that four in ten had vaped in the past 30 days. The results surprised many residents, who falsely believed that tobacco use had declined in recent years. The campaign also conducted a public opinion poll that showed that 68 percent of San Diego voters supported a policy that would end the sale of flavored tobacco to youth.

Armed with these powerful polling numbers, the coalition’s core members began to enlist support from other community groups such as Somali Family Services, United Women of East Africa and San Ysidro Health, groups with whom SAY San Diego already had established relationships. Many of the groups were already working on anti-tobacco initiatives and their participation in the campaign allowed them to amplify their message. For example, the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council strengthened the campaign by highlighting the prevalence of



menthol cigarettes among Black smokers, who also suffer from higher rates of lung cancer. San Ysidro Health, which serves 145,000 people in the San Diego area each year, was already working on smoking cessation in their target communities and built on the momentum of the campaign to educate patients about the risks.

These non-traditional stakeholders were critical to the campaign’s success because they already had sway in their communities after many years of service. “One of the biggest ways we lent our voice on the campaign was by including our logo,” said Besma Coda, clinic service manager at San Ysidro Health, which has been part of the San Diego community since 1969. “Our organization is a recognized brand; our doctors are trusted messengers. People look to them to get educated about issues.”

ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC SPEAKING TRAINING

The campaign created talking points about the flavors ordinance that were used by supporters when speaking during city council meetings and press conferences. Nontraditional stakeholders such as school officials, the Sierra Club and members of faith-based communities wrote opinion editorials in the local press and in their own newsletters advocating for the ban. The campaign also provided public speaking training, including how to deliver impactful public comments at council meetings.

STRONG VISUALS

Strong visuals were integral to the campaign's success. Pediatricians in white lab coats spoke at press conferences to publicly address the danger of flavored tobacco on youth. Eye-catching characters such as Jeff the Diseased Lung and Grim Reapers turned heads at press events. Another powerful visual, high school students from the San Diego Unified School District led efforts to garner signatures for a petition in favor of the flavors ordinance. The students collected over 1,000 signatures that was shared with the San Diego City Council and became another symbol of support for the policy, especially because it came from youth who are the targets of Tobacco Industry marketing of flavored tobacco and are not old enough to vote.

Another visual was in the form of mailers, funded by the Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund, encouraging residents to contact councilmembers and urge them to end the sale of flavored tobacco. The postcards were engaging in their design and clear in their messaging.

USING DATA

The campaign conducted Tobacco Purchase Surveys with volunteer decoys aged 18 and 19 years to buy tobacco products at stores throughout San Diego, ultimately showing that one in three businesses and one in two smoke shops were selling tobacco to people under 21 years of age. This allowed the campaign to counter the tobacco lobby's narrative that stores don't sell tobacco to underage youth with real time data. San Diego Unified School District, which serves more than 100,000 students, conducted its own survey that showed that 42% of high school students have ever vaped. The campaign used this compelling local statistic to challenge the myth that tobacco use among youth was declining.



MEDIA COVERAGE

The Tobacco-Free Kids Action Fund sponsored a paid media effort that included radio ads, digital ads, mobile billboards, and a TV ad. A dedicated public relations team worked to generate Letters to the Editors and to secure Opinion Editorials.

The coalition organized several press conferences during which doctors, school officials and faith leaders spoke about the importance of passing the proposed flavors policy. One of the press events was focused solely on the dangers of hookah, while the other featured a Kaiser Vice President and the President of the California PTA, who represented easily recognized community institutions that work with children.



CHALLENGES

The campaign encountered a number of challenges. Because of competing policy issues, the campaign was challenged with convincing San Diegans and policymakers that vaping among young people was a pressing issue. As supporters began to speak about the need for a local policy, many retailers pushed back, saying that the issue would hurt small businesses, and that they already did a good job restricting sales to young people. The campaign was able to use the data gathered from the Tobacco Purchase Survey to demonstrate that the narrative retailers were pushing was false and increase public support.

Another threat occurred when the first draft of the policy was released and lacked the provisions that are usually included in a comprehensive flavored tobacco policy. This first draft included only flavored vaping products and exempted flavored tobacco like menthol cigarettes and flavored cigarillos. In this case, the watered-down version was introduced by the policy's lead champion on the City Council. With this weak proposed policy on the table, several coalition members and partners announced that they could not support the policy, threatening the viability of the entire campaign. A massive effort was mounted to grow pressure, on the council, which included both outreach from the community, and grassroots outreach from key statewide players, and ultimately, the policy was strengthened.

But arguably, the biggest challenge came from the hookah industry and their community backers to exempt hookah tobacco in the flavored tobacco policy. A San Diego-based manufacturer of hookah tobacco, strongly opposed the inclusion of hookah, arguing that hookah was a centuries-old tradition in the Middle East and banning their sale was "culturally insensitive." At risk of losing the

entire policy, the coalition held strong on the hookah exemption, knowing that the policy's passage would make San Diego the largest city in the country to adopt a policy ending the sale of menthol cigarettes. The coalition has expressed its commitment to addressing the hookah issue down the road.



Mayor Todd Gloria signing SAAFE ACT

MOVING FORWARD

The local policy, Stop Adolescent Addiction From E-Cigarettes or SAAFE Act, was passed by the San Diego City Council May 2022. However, the policy did not go into effect until January 1, 2023. Two months into the new law, anecdotal evidence has shown that some San Diego merchants continue to sell flavored tobacco products. Campaign leaders are hoping that compliance will improve with time as more merchants learn about the new law. "It takes education for retailers and intention from the enforcing bodies," Knapp said. "The groundwork has been laid for success, now we just need to provide enough education."

For information, go to
SanDiegansvsbigtobacco.org