



# Case Study: Willits and Ukiah Make Progress on Tobacco Retail Licensing

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mendocino County Tobacco Control and Prevention Coalition includes more than 30 traditional and nontraditional stakeholders working to make Mendocino County a healthier community. Located in Northern California, this rural county has one of the highest rates of teen tobacco use in California, according to the 2020 California Student Tobacco Survey. The county's unincorporated areas have had a Tobacco Retail License (TRL) policy, including a ban on flavored tobacco since November 2020 and the Coalition sought to extend the TRL and the flavor ban to the county's four cities, initially focusing on the cities of Willits and Ukiah.

In addition to protecting public health, the Coalition aimed to create a level playing field for retailers. While retailers in unincorporated areas were subject to a Tobacco Retail License, retailers that operated in Willits and Ukiah were not. Therefore, the Coalition needed to convince the cities' councils of the benefits of having the same policy applied to all jurisdictions within the county.

Despite opposition from some retailers and decision makers, the Coalition pressed on, regularly educating elected officials at city council meetings, and writing editorials in local

publications. The Mendocino County Public Health Department's Tobacco Prevention Program presenting compelling data from trusted messengers to City officials. In May 2023, the Coalition's efforts paid off. The city councils of both Willits and Ukiah passed comprehensive TRL policies, which went into effect June 1, 2023.

## THE CHALLENGE

As in any campaign, there were a number of challenges along the way, including convincing city leaders there was a need to take action to reduce youth access to flavored tobacco. In 2021, at the start of the campaign, the mayor of Willits, a business owner and a member of the local Chamber of Commerce, pushed back, saying that restricting tobacco use among teens was "the schools' job." In Ukiah, elected officials believed there were too many other issues that needed to be prioritized over tobacco, not least of which was the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, at that time, councilmembers from both cities were hesitant to pass a TRL policy as they were awaiting the results of the Proposition 31 referendum of the state that would eliminate the sale of most flavored tobacco products. Proposition 31 was approved by California voters in November 2022.

*"Our whole coalition is made up of a group of people who have come together with the idea that we are looking at the health and wealth of our communities.*

*-Larry Olson, Coalition Chair*

## THE APPROACH

### *Use Data to Demonstrate the Problem:*

In Willits, the Coalition made their case for a TRL using compelling data from the 2019 California Healthy Kids Survey. The survey showed that 43 percent of Mendocino County 11th graders have used e-cigarettes and 68 percent of 11th graders in Mendocino County reported that electronic cigarettes were “easy” or “very easy” to obtain. However, the campaign needed more localized data that could demonstrate the need for a TRL policy. With a limited budget, they set out to collect data on their own. A coalition member organization had young adults who were trained to do Young Adult Tobacco Purchase Surveys, also known as Decoy Buys. The parent and son spent a weekend attempting to purchase tobacco products from local retailers. The parent supervised the shopping spree (while staying out of sight), as is protocol for these types of decoy operations. The result of the experiment showed that nearly half of the stores sold tobacco to the underage youth decoy. Armed with this new information, Coalition members could now present data to decision-makers that demonstrated a significant community problem that needed to be addressed.

### *Select Trusted Messengers:*

In a rural county such as Mendocino, selecting well-known and trusted community members to deliver your message is vital to the success of a campaign. The Coalition elected Larry Olson, a former teacher, school board member and longtime community activist as the chair of the all-volunteer coalition to spearhead the campaign. Larry’s leadership, communication skills, and passion inspired others to join the coalition, many of which had prior experience working on public health and tobacco initiatives. Coalition members were able to speak confidently about the issues at special community events and during public comment at city council meetings. Soon the coalition had grown to become a strong network of reliable representatives that were trusted by the community and decision makers.

### *Find a Window of Opportunity:*

While the city of Willits was more receptive to updating their existing TRL policy, the city of Ukiah needed more convincing. Even though coalition members had maintained pressure on local officials through regular public comment at city council meetings, the city council was hesitant to take action. Activists suggested that the city could partner with the Coalition to craft their own policy, giving local officials a sense of control and ownership. The decision makers agreed. As a result, the city, county Tobacco Prevention Program, and the Coalition developed a partnership that would help the city comply with the state flavors law while also passing a TRL policy that met and exceeded the objectives of the Coalition.

## Takeaways

- **Be present:** Make sure the community knows your message and brand. Make local leaders - religious leaders, business leaders, teachers, doctors – want to be part of your coalition.
- **Be passionate:** Find people who are passionate about sharing their story or who can ignite the same passion in others through data, stories, and key information.
- **Be clear:** Tobacco control and prevention can be a very technical topic. Breakdown the boring stuff to really get at the why this issue matters to your community and why it needs to be passed now.
- **Be persistent:** Attend city council meetings even when your item is not on the agenda. Be a visible reminder to the decision-makers that flavored tobacco is a problem in the community. Be creative and meet objections head-on. When it became clear that the state law would pass, the Coalition convinced Ukiah city leaders the Coalition could assist the city with crafting their own TRL policy.

## SUMMARY

In the end, the strong Coalition and partnership with the county tobacco prevention program made the case and generated support for the TRL for Ukiah and Willits. The Coalition was made up of those organizations and leaders that are engrained in the community, the Coalition was able to communicate effectively with decision-makers, be flexible, utilize different tactics for different cities based on what they knew decision-makers needed to hear. The Coalition was able to use compelling localized statistics to convince the Willits City Council of an urgent need to pass a TRL policy, while they were able to work with the City of Ukiah using their expertise to guide the city council.

## COALITION

- ❖ Action Network - Teen Action Project
- ❖ Adventist Health
- ❖ American Cancer Society
- ❖ American Lung Association
- ❖ Blue Zones Project Lake County
- ❖ Blue Zones Project Mendocino County
- ❖ CA Indian Museum and Cultural Center - Tribal Youth Ambassadors for Tobacco Control
- ❖ Cancer Resource Centers of Mendocino County
- ❖ Caspar Community Member
- ❖ Consolidated Tribal Health Project
- ❖ Coyote Valley Band of Pomo Indians
- ❖ First 5 Mendocino
- ❖ Functional Medicine Practitioner and Naturopath - Willits Community Member
- ❖ Hopland Band of Pomo Indians
- ❖ Humboldt County Public Health - Tobacco Free Humboldt
- ❖ League of Women Voters of Mendocino County
- ❖ Mendocino Community Health Clinics, Inc
- ❖ Mendocino County AIDS/Viral Hepatitis Network
- ❖ Mendocino County Office of Education
- ❖ Mendocino County Public Health - Community Wellness
- ❖ Mendocino County Public Health - Environmental Health
- ❖ Mendocino County Youth Project
- ❖ NorCal 4 Health (CA Health Collaborative)
- ❖ Oropeza Consulting
- ❖ Point Arena School District
- ❖ Redwood Valley Band of Pomo Indians - Breathe Again Program
- ❖ Rural Initiatives Strengthening Equity (CA Health Collaborative)
- ❖ Sherwood Valley Band of Pomo Indians
- ❖ Tobacco Free North Coast
- ❖ Tobacco Use Prevention Education
- ❖ Tribal Community Coordinating Center
- ❖ Ukiah Unified School District
- ❖ United Indian Health Services, Inc.
- ❖ Yurok Tribe