Black and Latino Churches Launch Anti-Tobacco Youth Initiative

The coalition of African-American and Latino churches also supports the FDA's proposed ban on menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars.

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Preach it, indeed! Nearly 150,000 African-American and Latino churches—representing nearly 27.7 million people—are educating children and teens on the dangers of tobacco. Spearheaded by the National Black Church Initiative (NBCI), the effort dovetails with an announcement by the Food and Drug Administration that it seeks to ban menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars to help alleviate health disparities.

Menthol tobacco products are more popular among young people and African Americans, according to an FDA announcement on the proposed ban. Menthol flavoring masks many of the harsh and irritating effects of smoking, making such tobacco products more alluring to young people and nonsmokers. What's more, according to the FDA, the menthol interacts with nicotine in the brain, rendering the nicotine more addictive.

"The proposed rules would help prevent children from becoming the next generation of smokers and help adult smokers quit," said Xavier Becerra, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, in the FDA press release. "Additionally, the proposed rules represent an important step to advance health equity by significantly reducing tobacco-related health disparities."

The FDA is currently accepting public input on the proposed rules and will convene public listening sessions on June 13 and 15. The deadline for electronic or written comments is July 5. After reviewing the input, the FDA will release its findings and rulings. The agency notes that the prohibitions will target to manufacturers, sellers and retailers and not individual consumers. However, this doesn't mean that local and state law enforcement will do the same. Concerns over this aspect of the proposed ban—especially how Black, Latino and young people could be affected by law enforcement—are part of the request for public input.

In the meantime, NBCI is educating youth and young adults now on the ways tobacco harms people's health and how folks can abstain from tobacco.

The church coalition's Anti-Tobacco Initiative for Children and Teens aims to develop 5,000 smoke-

free churches in Washington, DC, Maryland and Virginia and to reach 100,000 children between ages 9 and 16 in the next year.

“NBCI is proud to launch our anti-tobacco initiative and reach children and teens across our communities to promote better choices in their lives,” said the Reverend Anthony Evans, president of NBCI, in a press statement. “We project that our outreach effort within this program will provide the education, resources, and community support our children need to ensure they have healthy and successful futures.”

In 2019, more than 18.5 million people 12 and older smoked menthol cigarettes in the United States, according to the FDA. It’s estimated that prohibiting menthol cigarettes would result in a 15% drop in smoking in the next 40 years.

The FDA’s efforts to ban menthol tobacco products is part of the White House’s reignited Cancer Moonshot, one goal of which is to reduce cancer deaths by 50% over the next 25 years and to “end cancer as we know it.” To learn more, see “Biden Supercharges His 2016 Cancer Moonshot Program.”

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