

Halton grocery stores now more careful about selling cigarettes to minors: report

By JASON MISNER
The Champion

The Halton Region Health Department is relieved grocery stores are considerably more compliant when it comes to cigarette sales and minors.

A staff report, to be ratified at tomorrow's regional council meeting, shows minors were able to purchase cigarettes at 7 per cent of Halton's 28 grocery stores last year. That was by far the biggest area of improvement in compliance staff saw in 2003.

Previous statistics showed grocery stores were problematic in selling smokes to young kids. In 2002, the non-compliance rate was 34 per cent while in 2001 it was 27 per cent.

As a result, the Region made a concerted effort last year to help grocery stores increase their compliance rates. That included a letter sent by Halton's medical officer of health to supermarkets reminding them to obey the Tobacco Control Act.

Further, health staff talked to individual store owners/managers and expanded the education program for retailers, called Not to Kids, to all supermarkets to encourage better compliance.

Tony Amalfa, Halton's manager of environmental health, said he's pleased to see such a marked turn around. Also, he said it appears grocery stores wanted to conscientiously improve their compliance.

Overall, the rate of non-compliance in the region improved a lot.

On the basis of 245 checks from a pool of 472 retailers that sell cigarettes, the rate dropped from 13 per cent in 2002 to 7 per cent last year. The 2001 rate was 15 per cent.

Mr. Amalfa said these reductions are encouraging because the Region's ultimate goal is to protect young kids' health by making it too difficult for them to illegally buy cigarettes.

The Region's goal is to keep non-compliance below 10 per cent.

Other notable changes include variety stores with a non-compliance rate of 3 per cent in 2003 versus 9 per cent in 2002; gas bars with a non-compliance rate of 6 per cent in 2003 compared to 12 per cent in 2002.

In accordance with Ministry of Health and Long-term Care guidelines, the Region hires teenagers, ages 15 to 17 to try to buy cigarettes from retailers. Legally you have to be 19 and older to buy

smokes.

Shoppers, while being supervised by public health officials, approach a retailer to buy cigarettes. If successful, they leave the store and hand over the smokes to the waiting inspector who returns to the retailer and talks to the employee or employer.

A \$200 ticket can be issued at that time or the Region can charge the store, which means the retailer would have to appear in court.

A total of only two charges — both involving gas bars — were laid in 2003, down from 10 the previous year.

Burlington Regional Councillor Rick Craven, chair of the health and social services committee, said "it's good news" compliance rates are getting better.

The Region, he said, offers education seminars to businesses to learn to become more compliant.

For more information about the seminars, call the Region at (905) 825-6000.

But Mr. Craven scratches his head in trying to figure out why youth would want to smoke in the first place.

Jason Misner can be reached at jmisner@miltoncanadianchampion.com.

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