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Three out of four rural and small town California voters support requiring tobacco licenses for store owners

(Sacramento, California -- Embargoed Until May 21, 2008, 12:00 Noon-Pacific) Three out of four voters who live in California's rural communities and small towns would support local laws requiring store owners to get a license to sell cigarettes, according to a public opinion survey conducted for the Center for Tobacco Policy and Organizing, a project of the American Lung Association of California.

- Nine out of ten voters agree that a store owner who repeatedly sells cigarettes to minors should lose the right to sell cigarettes.
- Two-thirds of rural voters have no problem with a fee of \$200 a year for a tobacco license to pay for enforcement of the law, and
- 72% want a "strong enforcement system" because "we can't trust" store owners to police themselves.

These dramatic results challenge common assumptions that rural residents may be more tolerant of tobacco use and less willing to accept government regulation of store owners to prevent tobacco sales to minors. A typical tobacco retailer licensing ordinance requires store owners who choose to sell tobacco to pay a fee to local government to secure a license with the revenues being used to enforce the law that makes it illegal to sell tobacco to minors. Underage youth are used to check on whether stores are breaking the law.

"The rates of sale to under-18 decoys in our county (unincorporated) still remain at approximately 25%," said Kern County Supervisor Michael Rubio. "A County-issued tobacco license and fee structure is our best bet to fight the continued sale of tobacco to minors," he said.

"We store owners get cash flow and income from selling cigarettes," said Bill Hall, owner of Four Corners Market in Alturas in Modoc County. "We need to understand that if we sell to kids, we won't be permitted to sell cigarettes at all. That's what licensing tobacco retailers will do."

"The results in this survey reflect what I see on a regular basis from our residents working to reduce youth access to tobacco in Kings County," said Oralia Vallejo, Project Director of the Kings County Tobacco Control Program. "The bottom line is that people are worried about their kids beginning to smoke."

The survey data found that 86 percent agreed with the statement in the survey that "teen smoking leads to heart disease, lung disease, and cancer later in life (and that) there is no more effective way to improve the health of your community than to reduce smoking, especially among teens." In addition, 75 percent of these rural and small town voters expressed their belief that if you make it harder for teenagers to buy cigarettes, it will reduce teen smoking. 80 percent believe that licensing laws succeed in reducing teen access to cigarettes.

"We can educate our children in the home" said Kathy Cruz, parent of three children in Kings County and a member of Kings County Tobacco-Free Partnership, "but we cannot shield them from all the dangers in our community. We need tobacco retailers to obey the law and (we need) local law enforcement to make sure they do. In our community tobacco retailers sell tobacco to

underage youth and if teenagers do not have the money for a pack, they will sell them single cigarettes. That's what gets them started, and it is so difficult to quit," she said.

"Parents are asking for help in keeping tobacco out of the hands of their kids," said Kimberly Weich Reusche, Director of the Center for Tobacco Policy and Organizing. "Nine out of ten parents of teens support requiring stores to get a license to sell tobacco. It's against the law to sell tobacco to kids, and parents want that law enforced," said Ms. Reusche.

The voters selected for the survey were rigorously screened to ensure that they lived in the 29 most rural, least densely populated counties in the state and did not live in or near a town with a population over 25,000.

The survey interviewed 945 rural and small town voters in 29 counties spanning three regions of the state: the Central Valley, northern California and the Sierras. 315 voters were interviewed in each region. Rural and small town voters were identified by excluding the Bay Area and Southern California counties, excluding counties with a population density exceeding 110 people per square mile, and from the remaining counties, excluding cities with a population over 25,000.

Complete survey results are posted on the Center's website:

<http://www.center4tobaccopolicy.org/polling-rural>

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The Center for Tobacco Policy & Organizing is a project of the American Lung Association of California and funded by the California Department of Public Health, Tobacco Control Program. The Center assists local communities address tobacco related policies using community organizing strategies, and provides policy information and analysis regarding state and local tobacco related legislation and policy issues.

For 100 years, the American Lung Association has been the lead organization working to prevent lung disease and promote lung health. Lung disease death rates continue to increase while other leading causes of death have declined. The American Lung Association funds vital research on the causes of and treatments for lung disease. With the generous support of the public, the American Lung Association is "Improving life, one breath at a time." For more information about the American Lung Association or to support the work it does, call 1.800.LUNG.USA (1.800.586.4872) or visit www.californialung.org or www.lungusa.org.