

Achieving Health Equity: California's New Plan for Tobacco

The Tobacco Education Research Oversight Committee (TEROC) has a new strategic plan for ending the tobacco epidemic in California. Titled "Achieving Health Equity: Toward a Commercial Tobacco-Free California, 2021-2022," it calls on tobacco control partners and allies to **recommit to the vision of a commercial tobacco-free California**, prioritize **health equity**, and **counter the industry** that exploits our communities. The plan sets three broad goals:

- Support health equity by working to **eliminate tobacco-related disparities** and their root causes
- **Reduce commercial tobacco use** to 8% of the state population by 2022
- Address the **overlap between tobacco, cannabis, and e-cigarettes** that threatens progress in tobacco control

Objectives

The 2021-2022 Plan provides seven broad objectives:

1. Reduce disparities related to commercial tobacco use
2. Strengthen capacity for tobacco control
3. Broaden the public health framework for tobacco to address the triangulum of tobacco, cannabis, and e-cigarettes
4. Prevent youth and young adults from initiating tobacco use and empower them as advocates for tobacco and cannabis control
5. Minimize the secondary effects of tobacco and cannabis on people and the environment
6. Motivate and help tobacco users to quit
7. Counter industries engaged in the manufacture, marketing, sale, and distribution of tobacco and cannabis products

Health Equity

The struggle to end the tobacco epidemic is a **fight for health equity**. California has made excellent progress in lowering overall rates of tobacco use, but some communities still suffer from higher than average tobacco use, higher rates of tobacco-related disease, and poor access to treatment. These disparities often result from **predatory tobacco industry marketing** as well as **deeper social inequalities** faced by people of color, LGBTQ individuals, people with behavioral health issues, people of lower economic status, and other marginalized communities. Achieving health equity requires:

- Reducing tobacco-related health disparities
- Prioritizing groups and populations that have received the least benefit from the progress in tobacco control to date
- Building power and influence in communities that have been underserved
- Addressing structural, political, and social determinants that underlie health disparities

Tobacco, Vaping, and Cannabis

California youth now use e-cigarettes more than cigarettes, use cannabis at higher rates than tobacco, and increasingly use tobacco and cannabis together. The e-cigarette and cannabis industries have become corporatized like the tobacco industry and are using their power and influence in similar ways. The public often views cannabis as low-risk or even as a wellness product, which threatens to renormalize smoking and vaping. California's strategies for tobacco prevention offer lessons that can be applied to cannabis.

Protecting Youth

The challenge of preventing young people from initiating tobacco use has been greatly complicated by the arrival of new products such as e-cigarettes and vaping devices with kid-friendly names and flavors. Youth have largely abandoned combustible tobacco in favor of vaping, with only 2.0% of high school students smoking cigarettes in 2018, but 10.9% vaping tobacco. The legalization of marijuana poses additional challenges, as youth use cannabis more than tobacco (14.7% vs. 12.7%). Adapting to this changing landscape is critical to protecting the health of the next generation of Californians.

Some Actions to Take

- Prioritize reductions of and research on tobacco-related health disparities.
- Broaden the public health framework for tobacco to also address the triangulum of tobacco, cannabis, and e-cigarettes.
- Increase tobacco control workforce diversity and empower youth and young adults to take meaningful roles.
- Ensure that all schools, trade schools, colleges, and universities have tobacco-free policies and follow best practices for implementing them.
- Replace possession, use, and purchase (PUP) laws with more effective and equitable policies.
- Regulate secondhand smoke from tobacco and cannabis as toxic air contaminants and close loopholes in clean air laws.
- Continue to collaborate with environmental groups to create upstream solutions that protect the environment from tobacco product waste.
- Work with the Department of Health Care Services to transform Medi-Cal into a model for tobacco cessation.