

La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



Tobacco Industry Targets Youth

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In New York State, the tobacco industry spends \$1.1 million every day marketing its products to potential smokers. With federal regulations restricting television and print advertising, tobacco companies spend much of this budget on in-store advertising, and they have a specific target in mind: youth. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the 18,000 public high school students living in New York City who currently smoke cigarettes, one-third will die prematurely as a direct result of smoking.

The dangers of smoking are not news to anyone, including the tobacco industry. As more smokers die or quit each day, the tobacco industry needs to cultivate “replacement smokers,” the next generation of tobacco consumers, in order to stay in business.

It is no coincidence that tobacco marketing is more prevalent in stores where teens frequently shop. Another non-coincidence: of the 11,500 tobacco retailers in New York City, 75 percent are located within 1,000 feet of a school. This is a very effective tactic. Fully 90 percent of regular smokers start before the age of 18.

Thursday, November 17, was the American Cancer Society’s 36th annual Great American Smokeout. On this day, smokers were encouraged to give up smoking for 24 hours. The idea is that if smokers can stop for just today, they can start the process of quitting. The Department of Health estimates that there are 964,000 smokers in New York City. For them, this might have been the day they quit for good.

In partnership with the New York City Coalition for a Smoke-Free City, the American Lung Association led policy makers on walking tours in each of the five boroughs to highlight the presence of youth-targeted advertising. Tour participants walked the streets in each of the five boroughs where they encountered what our kids see each and every day: advertising meant to appeal to youth and encourage them to smoke. I saw this first hand on the Manhattan tour: walking out the front door of a lower East Side school, the first store in sight is plastered with tobacco ads, with emphasis on brands that have high appeal with young smokers.

The American Lung Association and the Coalition for a Smoke-Free City hope that the tours inspire further discussion with decision makers on how tobacco marketing can be limited to reduce the damaging effect it has on our youth. Possible solutions the groups are advocating include decreasing the visibility of tobacco marketing in stores, limiting the sale of tobacco near schools, and prohibiting the sale of tobacco at pharmacies.

Smoking is a particular issue in low-income neighborhoods. There is a widening gap in life expectancy between richer and poorer Americans. One reason is that smoking has declined more rapidly among

people with higher incomes. In particular, the transition of the pharmacy from a health care provider to a tobacco retailer has disproportionately affected racial and ethnic minorities.

In New York City, the number of people hospitalized for cancer, heart disease, and diabetes in low-income neighborhoods is much higher than in other neighborhoods. Also, we know that secondhand smoke exacerbates the condition of asthma, which often afflicts children of low-income families. Hospitalization rates for asthma in East Harlem are five times higher than the rates for the Upper East Side.

The Great American Smokeout was a day for smokers to get the smoke out of their lives, but it should also be seized upon as a reason to rally support for getting the smoke out of places where our kids shop and away from schools.

David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 165 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.