

Members of the Reno Valley Middle School RESIST group, eighth graders Denae Engelland, Katelyn King, Cori Williams, and RVMS RESIST Coordinator Rachelle Annis, with Reno County Health Educator Tonya Culp, participated in Take Down Tobacco Day on March 1-2, 2023, in Topeka.

Take Down Tobacco Day-is a day of action where young people will rally with advocates to call out Big Tobacco for targeting kids with products like e-cigarettes and to urge elected officials to take action to protect kids.

RESIST is a statewide youth-led movement that uses activism to expose and encourage others to resist big tobacco's manipulative marketing tactics. We currently have three chapters in Reno County.

These are some of the issues that the participants spoke to their representatives about:

The nearly 10 million dollars issued to Kansas for the Juul settlement money - Juul rocketed to the top of U.S. vaping market starting five years ago by specifically targeting their campaigns towards youth that caused teenagers to become addicted to nicotine. The resulting settlement restricted Juul from aiming marketing of its products at young people. Our mission was to ask our representatives to keep the funding in prevention strategies to give resources to those now addicted and to continue the education of the harms of all tobacco products like vapes.

Repealing the PUP law: a law passed in the 90's that prohibits the possession, use, and purchase (PUP) of tobacco products by minors. Minors can be fined for offenses by this law. No education of the harms of tobacco are linked with this. At this time students can be fined and sent home from school. We believe this is ineffective as deterrents to youth smoking. Instead, we are advocating for nonpunitive policies. We believe education about the harms of tobacco products, especially to the developing brains of our youth, should be part of the tobacco policies. We believe that stiffer penalties should be imposed on those that are supplying the products to the underage youth. We want to address the addiction in our youth with evidence-based education prevention strategies.

Protecting local tobacco prevention and control: some of the things would be tobacco free parks, tobacco 21, retail licensing and compliance. Our students did such a great job asking our representatives to allow local control of funding. They spoke to Representatives Paul Waggoner and Jason Probst about how local governments are uniquely positioned to meet the needs of the people in their own communities. They should be able to pass laws that are proven to promote good health, well-being, and equity. One size doesn't fit all when it comes to state laws, oftentimes, local governments know their residents best. Here in Kansas, our state has taken many positive steps to improve the health of people across the state. We want to make sure cities, towns, and counties continue to have the option to build on this progress and pass laws to help their communities and local businesses thrive.

One important bill that was introduced before the house while we were there was House Bill 2269. This bill applied to the sale, purchase or possession of cigarette and tobacco products, raising the legal age from 18 to 21. This was a great opportunity for our youth to watch and hear the steps taken during the legislative session on this bill. We sat quietly in our bright yellow shirts in the gallery above the legislative floor and listened to debates on this bill. We heard amendments issued to be added in this bill. We saw the denial of those amendments and the bill set forth for vote. We held our breath as the vote was cast and passed! We wanted to clap out loud for the victory for our state, but refrained out of respect for the environment in which we were allowed. What a historical day for our youth to witness, one I am sure they will remember. With the passing of the law the state of Kansas is now in compliance with the federal law that went into effect in December of 2019.

The RVMS youth toured the capitol and even made the arduous trip up 296 steps to view the dome.

Tonya Culp, Health Educator, Reno County Health Department