

By Tennessee Attorney General BOB COOPER

Tobacco use continues to be the number one cause of preventable death in the United States and worldwide. Tobacco kills more than 400,000 Americans and more than 5 million people worldwide every year, Tobacco Free Kids statistics show. Additionally, the organization discovered almost 90 percent of all adult smokers started smoking before they reached the age of 18 and that more than 2.6 million kids under the age of 18 currently use tobacco.

For these reasons, I want to encourage Tennesseans of all ages to support “Kick Butts Day” on March 21 this year. On that day, please stop by the Legislative Plaza in Nashville to see the youth-organized event, “Lives Cut Short,” sponsored by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Preventive Services, through the Oasis Center. There will be a display of cut-off shorts decorated by high school students in memory of friends or family whose lives were cut short by tobacco use.

Kick Butts Day is a national day of activism that empowers youth to take a stand against tobacco use. My Office challenges all Tennesseans to help prevent minors from getting access to tobacco—so there will be fewer Tennessee smokers having to “kick butts” each year.

Research shows more than half of all under-age smokers buy cigarettes either directly from retailers or vending machines, from other kids, or by giving money to others to buy for them. Minimizing the number of retailers willing to illegally sell cigarettes to kids has been shown to reduce youth smoking.

Tennessee and 51 other states and jurisdictions entered the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) with the major tobacco companies in 1998. One of the reasons my office participated in the MSA was to help curb youth access to tobacco. In Tennessee, the MSA settled a lawsuit that the state filed against tobacco manufacturers alleging consumer protection, antitrust and unjust enrichment claims. Since its creation, more than 50 tobacco companies have joined the MSA.

Many of the public health provisions contained in the MSA are geared toward making tobacco

less accessible to young people. The MSA specifically prohibits targeting youth in tobacco advertisements, promotion or marketing. The agreement also prohibits tobacco manufacturers who joined the MSA from using cartoons in advertising, promoting, packaging or labeling of tobacco products. Additionally, tobacco product manufacturers who are MSA members are substantially limited in the types of sponsorships in which they are involved. All of these provisions were put into place to help curb youth access to tobacco. The MSA also provides funding for a foundation that addresses youth tobacco use.

My office participates in a Youth Access Prevention working group to improve coordination among different agencies, pursue smoking prevention initiatives, and raise awareness of the health risks associated with youth tobacco use. This group will participate with high school students across the state of Tennessee to promote Kick Butts Day.