



Sociedad Latina Connects Tobacco Sales with the Health of Young People

Site Profile

In the 1990s, Massachusetts led the nation in anti-smoking programs, but from 2000 to 2004, the state cut its funding for tobacco prevention by 95 percent. The drastic cuts had an impact, according to a [report](#) (page 5) from the [Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids](#). One statistic is particularly sobering: the smoking rate among high school students, which had declined 41 percent between 1995 and 2003, remained virtually the same between 2003 and 2005.

Data like that rankle the staff and young people who work with Sociedad Latina, a Boston-based youth organization that helps Latino youth stay in school, pursue academic achievement and learn marketable employment skills. But the numbers are also fuel for Sociedad's young community organizers as they campaign to improve conditions in their neighborhoods.

Sociedad joined the [PATH](#) program in 2003 with the goal of restoring some funding for youth tobacco prevention in the city. They had a clear strategy in mind—raising the annual \$50 licensing fee that merchants were required to pay the city in order to sell tobacco. That fee had not been raised in more than a decade. Sociedad also received matching funds from the Hyde Square Task Force and the Whittier Street Health Center, and contributed to the efforts out of its own operating funds. The presence of unrestricted matching funds enabled it to pay for some activities, such as lobbying, that could not be supported with its Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) grant.

Melissa Luna, Sociedad's director of community organizing, who oversaw the PATH project, called the longstanding fee "ridiculous." She said, "to get a liquor license it costs \$2,500 a year. We wanted to increase the tobacco fee to \$150 and have that extra money go to enforcement and tobacco prevention efforts in the city."

The group also wanted to reduce the rate at which minors were allowed to purchase cigarettes in Boston, which had risen 10 percent from 2003 to 2004. "Merchants routinely received only a fine if they got caught selling tobacco products to minors," Luna said. "We wanted a three-strikes rule where if a merchant gets caught selling to minors for a

third time, he loses his permit for the rest of the year. To reapply, he has to get community support."

Sociedad, along with two other neighborhood groups—Hyde Square Task Force and the Whittier Street Health Center—got to work. They trained nine young people in community organizing and mobilized them to go into local stores and bodegas to see how tobacco was being marketed.

Youth advocate Ronald Chang, 17, was on assignment at a neighborhood 7-Eleven when he made a startling discovery. After purchasing a small bag of Skittles for \$1.48, he noticed that just below the candy charge on his receipt was the message: "Marlboro 3 Pack Deal Only \$14.07."

Young people went back and bought more items, to see if this was just a fluke. The cigarette messages were basically the same on every receipt. As Chang told a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, "My little sister, 10 years old, can go in any store, buy Skittles, and she'll get an ad for tobacco. Here's a deal on cigarettes, here's an easy way to buy them cheap."

The young people took enlarged copies of the Skittles receipt to City Councilor Michael Ross, who had become an ally in Sociedad's campaign. The receipt was potent evidence that cigarettes were routinely promoted to minors.

Working with Ross, the youth organizers co-authored an ordinance that would:

- Increase merchant tobacco permit fees.
- Increase fines for retailers who sell tobacco to minors.
- Institute a "three strikes" rule requiring community input before reissuing vendor licenses to merchants who have lost their licenses because of repeated sales to minors.

The proposed ordinance spurred a wave of protest by merchants, who argued they could not increase cigarette prices to cover higher fees because prices were set by the tobacco companies. One city councilor, sympathetic to the merchants, amended the ordinance, reducing the fee to \$100 instead of \$150.

In a final push before the vote, Sociedad hosted a Tobacco Education Day at City Hall with some 30 teenagers giving councilors and aides the facts about the impact of tobacco on young people. The youth also went to schools and other venues to get some 600 youth to sign a petition in support of the ordinance.

On December 8, 2004, the Boston City Council passed the ordinance. The extra \$46,500 collected in 2005 from the permit fees was earmarked for enforcing underage smoking laws. In July 2005, the Boston Tobacco Control Program reported that the rate of tobacco sales to youth had dropped from 15 percent to 6 percent.

Luna said the most gratifying part of Sociedad's advocacy project has been watching young people grow in their knowledge and confidence as they confront the issues.

"Having the kids be the ones to teach the city councilors about what is going on in the neighborhood is really challenging that traditional model of power," Luna said. The city councilors are letting the young people take the lead, she said, because "they are really seeing the youth as the experts. They have dedicated so many years to this issue, more than anyone else in the public health commission or any city entity or any of the councilors."

At the end of 2004, its PATH project complete, Sociedad Latina set its sights on another target—tobacco companies' advertising practices. RWJF awarded Sociedad a \$46,500 grant (ID# 052384) to mobilize youth and families to campaign against the use of unregulated tobacco advertising practices directed at children by local merchants.

"There is a statistic that 75 percent of youth visit a convenience store once a week, and convenience stores also are located near schools," Luna said. "To create healthy communities is a public health issue and the prevention mechanism is to decrease the amount of advertising that happens in the neighborhood."