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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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City of Akron Introduces Legislation to Raise the Age for Tobacco Sales in Akron from 18 to 21

*Collaboration with Summit County Public Health aimed at reducing negative
health consequences including infant mortality*

Akron, Ohio, March 19, 2018 – When Mayor Horrigan appointed Tamiyka Rose as the City of Akron's first Health Equity Ambassador last Spring, he tasked her with developing and spearheading new strategies to reduce the City's unacceptable infant mortality rate. "I will never tolerate a scenario where Akron babies are more likely to die before their first birthday than babies born in other communities," Mayor Horrigan said. "I hired Tamiyka to coordinate our efforts locally, and help turn the tide."

"In looking at effective strategies to reduce infant mortality, smoking by young, expectant mothers was a key risk factor we needed to target," Rose said of the initiative. "Looking at the data, it was clear that increasing the tobacco sales age to 21 could meaningfully reduce infant mortality rates and improve lifelong health outcomes for today's youth."

More than 290 cities and counties across 19 states have increased the age for tobacco sales to 21, a movement commonly referred to as "[Tobacco 21](#)". Since 2015, 9 other Ohio cities, including Cleveland and Columbus, have passed similar laws.

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable deaths in the U.S. Not only is it costly in terms of human life, it has a tremendous financial toll. According to health policy research, increasing the national sales age for tobacco to 21 could save society an estimated \$212 billion over a 50-year period.

The Tobacco 21 strategy is proven to not just delay, but prevent, tobacco use in young people across their lifetimes. Military leaders are supportive of raising the tobacco age to 21 due to tobacco's negative impact on military readiness (more info available [here](#)).

"Individuals who have never used tobacco by age 21 are unlikely to ever start smoking. While it is estimated to reduce retail sales by only 2%, increasing the smoking age to 21 can prevent approximately 90% of new smokers from ever starting the habit, by making it difficult to obtain during the years they are most susceptible to the addiction," said Cory Kendrick Summit County Public Health's Director of Population Health.

And the link to infant mortality and premature birth is clear. “According to 2014 data, in Summit County, pregnant women under age 21 smoke at a rate that is 70% higher than their older counterparts,” Kendrick continued. “Nearly one in four pregnant women in Summit County age 18 to 21 smoked while pregnant. And pregnant women who smoke are more likely to experience the devastation of infant loss.”

Akron zip codes 44320, 44307 and 44306 have some of the highest infant mortality rates in the country, nearly double the national average. In 2016, 30 Akron babies died before their first birthday.

“If we are serious about giving Akron babies the best possible start to life, we must be willing to challenge structures and institutions that reinforce poor maternal health,” Tamiyka Rose said. “Tobacco use is a clear risk factor, and one we can do something about.”

Akron’s proposed Tobacco-21 legislation, co-sponsored by Councilwoman-at-large Linda Omobien, will be introduced to Akron City Council this afternoon. Representatives from Summit County Public Health, youth ambassadors, and physicians from Summa Health and Akron General/Cleveland Clinic will testify in support of the legislation.

“If you’re not willing to be part of the solution, you’re part of the problem,” Rose concluded. “We’re hoping Akron will choose a healthier future for its next generation.”

A fact sheet with more information about the local Tobacco 21 initiative is available [here](#).

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