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New smoking ban in effect, as is old black market for loosies

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Gregory Laurence walked into a West Side gas station last month with a handful of change and what's become a routine request in some parts of the city. Offering a dollar's worth of quarters, nickels and dimes, Laurence asked for "two Newport." Fellow smokers lined up behind to make the same transaction: A couple of smokes for a dollar, or one for 65 cents.

For many, this exchange wouldn't sound like a good deal, especially when a pack of 20 cigarettes hovers around \$7. But in some of Chicago's most impoverished neighborhoods, the practice of buying individual cigarettes -- known as "loosies" or "loose squares" -- has long been a way of life.

"You go in every station here, they're asking" for one or two cigarettes, said Iqbal Randhawa, owner of the Phillips 66 at Western Avenue and Lake Street. "The city's too expensive and they don't have money."

As Illinois prepared to go smoke-free Tuesday in bars, restaurants and most public buildings, the sale of loosies persists as an everyday slice of the smoking culture in a city where local, state and county taxes make cigarettes the most expensive in the nation.

Some health experts worry that despite the ban, the dangers of smoking will continue to loom large for minors and the poor -- the population segments officials say are most likely to buy one or two cigarettes at a time.

For years, the sale of loosies has been banned under Illinois, Cook County and Chicago laws, each deeming it illegal to vend cigarettes without proper tax stamps. But the enforcement of such laws is difficult, officials say.

The city issued 55 violations in 2007 to businesses caught breaking up packs and selling cigarettes one at a time, a level that has stayed about the same over the last several years.

Efrat Stein, spokeswoman for the city's Department of Business Affairs and Licensing, said people have been smoking loosies for a long time and that the city does not consider it a major problem.

"Unfortunately, people who sell loose cigarettes are moving targets," Stein said.

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The advertisement features the T-Mobile logo at the top left. Below it, the word "FREE" is written in pink, followed by "Samsung t629" in green. To the right is a silver Samsung t629 flip phone with a yellow smiley face on its screen. Below the phone, the text "1.3 MEGAPIXEL CAMERA", "BLUETOOTH® CONNECTIVITY", and "MUSIC PLAYER" is listed in blue. At the bottom left, a small icon of the phone is next to the text "GET IT NOW" in pink. The entire advertisement is enclosed in a red border.

Angel Castrejon, 16, can name multiple locations and people around Chicago from which he can get loose cigarettes, whether he is at school, work or home.

"Sometimes, man, you just have 50 cents, that's all you have for the day," Castrejon said, smoking outside Wells Community Academy High School, 936 N. Ashland Ave.

Illegal sales of cigarettes to minors have gone down across the state in recent years, but the availability of loosies to underage smokers may undermine that success, said Sean McDermott, director of policy, planning and government relations for the Cook County Department of Health.

"It's a lot easier to drop a quarter or 60 cents on a cigarette, and that could lead to addiction," he said.

Many loosies also are purchased by those in low-income neighborhoods, where peddlers outside currency exchanges or cashiers at fast-food stands hawk individual cigarettes, usually menthols.

"You could be walking in any neighborhood, in any urban setting," said Kwesi Ronald Harris, community organizer for Reality Illinois-Chicago, a statewide initiative to reduce tobacco consumption. "People will come up to you and say, 'I have those Newports. I have those Kools.'"

Some loosie smokers consider buying individual cigarettes a convenience, despite the higher price tag.

"It's like you've got more control over the amount of cigarettes you smoke," said Mike Ward, 33, a delivery driver from Chicago. "It helps me that way because I'm trying to quit."

Some public officials are calling for more money from tobacco lawsuit settlements to be invested in targeting youth tobacco abuse, including loosie sales, McDermott said.

Stacy Ignoffo, senior director of programs and professional services at Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago, said with the state going smoke-free, concern for other smoking habits can't be neglected.

"The fact that Illinois is going smoke-free, it does address the fact that people can't smoke indoors," she said. "But we do know that these single cigarettes are still being sold and it is illegal."

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