

Reducing Youth Access to Tobacco and Vaping in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health's enforcement and education efforts under the Smoke-Free Ontario Act (SFOA) are directly reducing the presence of illegal tobacco and vape products in the community.
- Product seizures have declined significantly over the past three years, from \$45,000 worth of product in 2023, to \$9,000 in 2024 and \$2,300 in 2025.
- Vendor compliance is improving across WDG Public Health, with charges and warnings decreasing by over 50 percent since 2023.
- Demand calls increased by 11 percent from 2024 to 2025, indicating continued growth in public awareness, reporting, and use of WDG Public Health services.
- Youth access remains a concern, particularly among specialty vape shops, which accounted for 46 percent of vape-related offences and 75 percent of repeat offenders in 2025.
- Education is preventing future harm, with 57 youth diverted through the Clear Choices program, supporting informed decision-making and behaviour change.
- WDG Public Health continues to demonstrate leadership and innovation, including provincial work on vape waste and integrated enforcement approaches.

Background

The *Smoke-Free Ontario Act, 2017* (SFOA) is provincial legislation designed to protect people from the harms of tobacco and vape products, with a strong emphasis on preventing youth from starting to use nicotine. The Act regulates where smoking and vaping can occur, how products are sold and displayed, and restricts youth access.

WDG Public Health is responsible for enforcing the SFOA in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph as required under the Ontario Public Health Standards. This work supports healthier communities by reducing exposure to harmful substances, preventing addiction and promoting informed decision-making.

A central goal of SFOA enforcement is to reduce youth access to tobacco and vaping products, as early nicotine exposure is strongly associated with long-term addiction and adverse health outcomes. Enforcement is carried out by tobacco enforcement officers and public health inspectors through routine inspections, complaint response and youth test shopping. These activities ensure:

- Products are not sold to anyone under 19 years of age.
- Prohibited products are not available.
- Display, promotion and signage requirements are followed.

This work is complemented by education and prevention initiatives, including school-based e-learning programs such as the *Clear Choices: Understanding Tobacco, Vaping and Cannabis* training module, which supports youth in understanding the risks of nicotine use.

The nicotine product landscape continues to evolve rapidly, requiring adaptable, data-driven approaches to enforcement and education. WDG Public Health's approach balances enforcement with prevention to reduce access, support behaviour change and improve long-term population health outcomes.

Discussion

Overview and Community Impact

SFOA enforcement and education activities in WDG are contributing to a measurable reduction in youth access to tobacco and vaping products, supporting healthier environments in schools, retail settings and the broader community.

Consistent with program data, WDG is seeing fewer illegal products and fewer violations, demonstrating that sustained, targeted enforcement combined with education is improving compliance and reducing community risk.

Display and Promotion Audits

In 2025, WDG Public Health completed 359 inspections, maintaining consistent enforcement coverage across a range of locations including convenience stores, gas stations and specialty vape shops.

Through the Tobacco Inspection Partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Finance, public health inspectors are now cross designated under both the *Tobacco Tax Act* (TTA) and the SFOA. This allows inspectors to identify contraband tobacco, enforce both health and tax laws, and work more effectively with provincial partners during a single inspection. This partnership and integrated approach improves efficiency and increases enforcement impact without requiring additional resources.

Enforcement Activity and Outcomes

Enforcement outcomes show clear improvement even without an increase in the frequency of inspection (Figure 1). This trend reflects increased adherence to legislation by vendors, reducing community exposure to illegal and harmful products.

In 2025, targeted enforcement was also conducted with a focus on repeat offenders. A total of 22 vendors were re-inspected, resulting in four reoffenders being charged. This target approach supports accountability among higher-risk vendors and reinforces compliance expectations.

Figure 1:

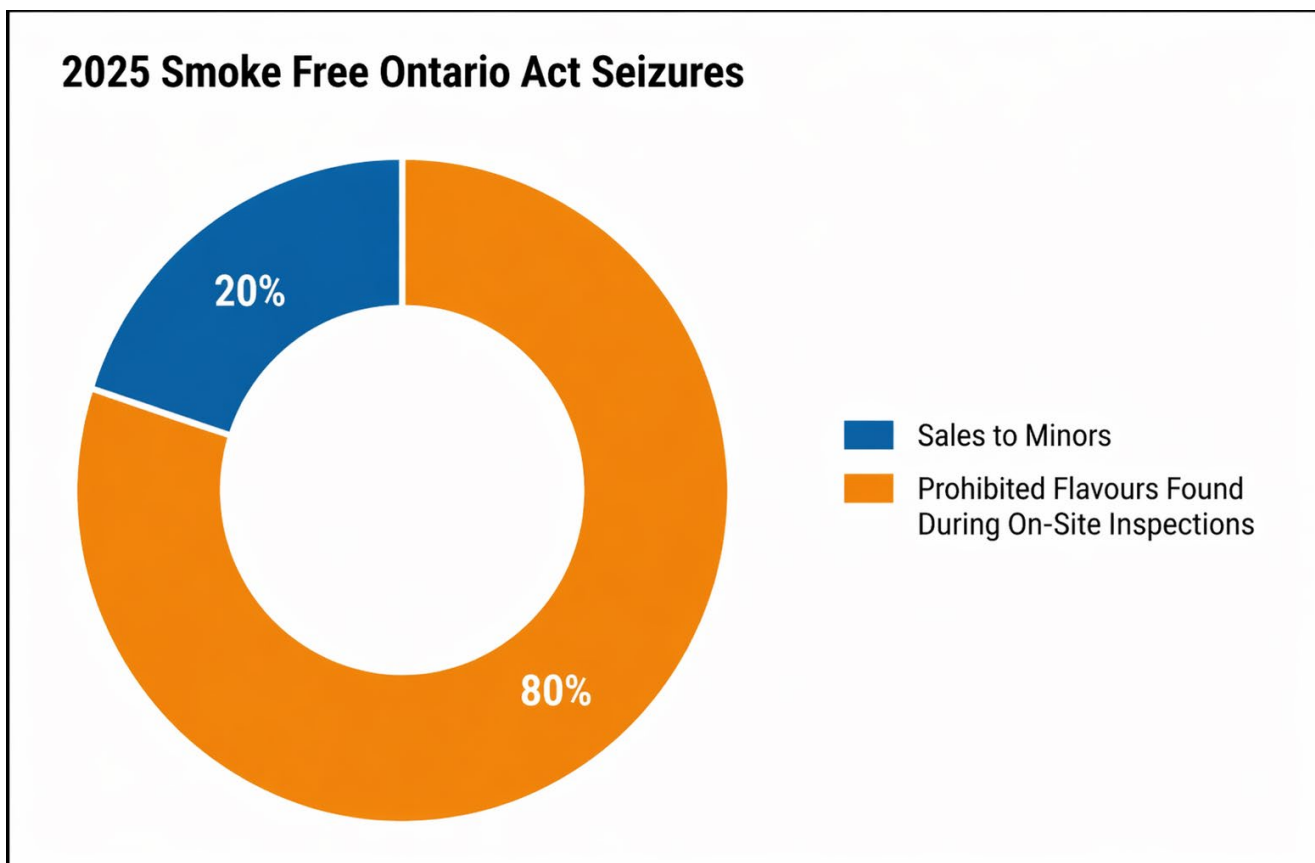
Enforcement Activity and Outcomes (2023-2025)		
Year	Inspections	Charges/Warnings
2023	339	100
2024	336	60
2025	359	46

Number of inspections and charges/warnings issued under the Smoke Free Ontario Act within WDG for 2023-2025. Data retrieved from the Tobacco Information System, Ministry of Health

Illegal Product Seizures

In 2025, approximately \$2,300 worth of illegal tobacco and vape products were seized, continuing a significant downward trend from previous years. The majority of seized items were prohibited flavoured vape products, which are known to appeal to youth (Figure 2). The decline in seizures reflects improved compliance and reduced availability of these products in the local market, helping to protect the health of youth and the broader community.

Figure 2:

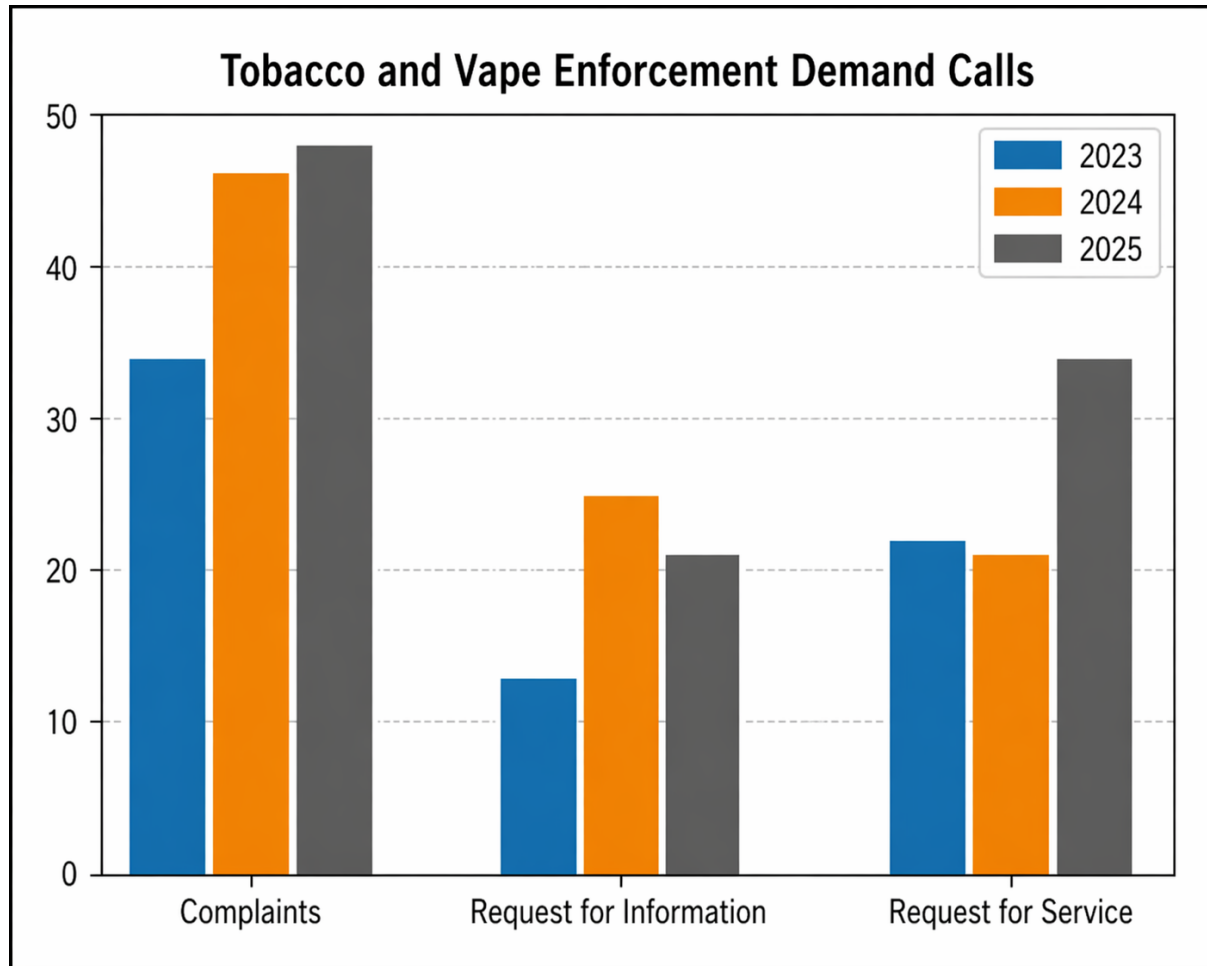


Percentage of Seized Tobacco and Vaping Products by Source and Type in 2025. Data retrieved from Environmental Health team, WDGPH

Complaints and Requests

There was an 11 percent (93 to 103) increase in demand calls, such as complaints and service requests, from 2024 to 2025 (Figure 3). Most of these were related to sales to minors or use in prohibited areas. This uptick signals a growing public awareness and concern about the health risks and regulatory violations associated with tobacco and vaping products.

Figure 3:



WDG 2023-2025 Demand Calls for SFOA, Environmental Health Department.

Many complaints involved smoking or vaping on secondary school property. First-time student offenders are required to complete the *Clear Choices* educational module. If non-compliance or repeat violations occur, notices of violation and provincial offence tickets may be issued.

Strong collaboration between WDG Public Health enforcement officers and high school administrators supports a consistent and coordinated response, reinforcing smoke and vape-free school environments and strengthening youth prevention efforts across the region.

Youth Test Shopping

A growing trend locally and across Ontario is the rise in vape product sales among youth, which have now surpassed traditional tobacco products. This highlights the need for continued, targeted enforcement.

In 2025, youth test shopping remained a key enforcement tool. During these test shopping activities, the Tobacco Enforcement Officer identified 23 offences (10 tobacco, 13 vape), indicating that approximately one in 20 retailers sold to underage shoppers.

Vape retailers showed higher risk:

- 46 percent of vape offences occurred at specialty vape shops
- 75 percent of repeat offenders were vaping shops

These findings suggest that specialty vape retailers are more likely to be non-compliant and less responsive to enforcement measures. WDG Public Health conducted nearly 600 test shopping audits, with tobacco vendors inspected twice per year and vape vendors once per year (Figure 4).

Figure 4:

Youth Test Shopping Numbers	
176	Vape Vendors
372	Tobacco Vendor
38	Specialty Vape Stores
586	Total Vendors

Number of Vape, Tobacco and Specialty Vape Vendors required test shopping within WDG. Tobacco vendors (186) require two audits per year and vape vendors (176) require one audit per year. Data retrieved from the Tobacco Information System, Ministry of Health

Education and Prevention

In addition to enforcement, education remains a key component of the program in preventing youth uptake of vaping and tobacco. In 2025, the *Clear Choices* program supported this approach, with 57 students completing the module as an alternative to ticketing.

The program is currently implemented across both major school boards in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph, with ongoing efforts to expand its reach and improve accessibility for students. Overall, *Clear Choices* demonstrates the value of school-based prevention by diverting youth from penalties and engaging them in meaningful education on the harms of smoking and vaping, supporting behaviour change and reducing future risk.

Next Steps

Focus Enforcement at High-Risk Vape Retailers and School Areas

WDG Public Health will continue youth test shopping with a targeted focus on non-compliant retailers, particularly specialty vape shops and those located near secondary schools. This data-driven approach prioritizes higher-risk locations to reduce youth access to nicotine products and improve overall compliance.

Pilot Retailer-Focused E-Learning

WDG Public Health has developed a targeted e-learning module for tobacco and vape retailers, with a focus on specialty vape shops. In 2026, the module will be piloted with select retailers to assess its impact on compliance. Building on the success of the *Clear Choices* program, this initiative applies a similar education-first approach to improve understanding of key regulations, including product restrictions and age-of-sale laws. It aims to support compliance at the point of sale and address gaps identified through inspections and youth test shopping.

Strengthen Follow-Up and Data-Driven Enforcement

WDG Public Health will increase follow-up inspections and repeat test shopping at locations with previous violations, using local data to identify trends and prioritize enforcement efforts. This ensures resources are focused where they will have the greatest impact as the nicotine landscape continues to evolve.

Environmental Impacts: Disposable Vapes and Waste Management

Disposable vapes present a growing environmental and public health challenge. These single-use devices contain lithium-ion batteries, plastics, metals and residual nicotine, creating a complex waste stream that is difficult to manage safely. When improperly discarded, they can contribute to landfill burden, pose risks to soil and water, and create fire hazards in waste systems.

In response, WDG Public Health, in collaboration with public health partners across Ontario, is developing a provincial guidance document, *ONDS Vape Waste Disposal in Ontario*. This resource outlines practical short-term actions and longer-term policy solutions to address gaps in disposal infrastructure and regulation.

Short-term actions focus on system-level improvements that can be implemented within existing resources, such as coordinating regional disposal approaches, integrating vape waste into hazardous waste contracts and working with municipalities to establish safe interim pathways.

Longer-term recommendations focus on upstream policy change, including advocating for the inclusion of vape products under Ontario's Extended Producer Responsibility framework. Additional strategies include considering restrictions on single-use products, improving product design for recyclability and enhancing public education on safe disposal.

WDG Public Health continues to collaborate with provincial partners to advance these solutions, supporting coordinated efforts to reduce environmental impact while protecting community health.

Health Equity Implications

WDG Public Health recognizes that social and structural factors can influence youth tobacco and vape use. Some youth may face increased exposure to nicotine products and fewer opportunities for prevention and education.

To address this, SFOA enforcement and education efforts are informed by local data and targeted to areas of higher risk. Initiatives such as targeted inspections and the *Clear Choices* program help reduce access to nicotine products while providing youth with accurate, accessible information.

WDG Public Health also works with schools and community partners to support prevention and early intervention. These efforts help ensure that youth across WDG have consistent access to supports that promote healthier choices and alternatives to nicotine use.

Conclusion

Through data-driven enforcement, education, and collaboration, WDG Public Health continues to make measurable progress in reducing youth access to tobacco and vape products. Declines in illegal product seizures, along with sustained inspection activity and targeted youth test shopping, demonstrate the effectiveness of these coordinated efforts in improving vendor compliance and reducing community exposure.

Education initiatives such as *Clear Choices* complement enforcement by supporting informed decision-making among youth and helping prevent future violations. Together, these approaches address both immediate risks and longer-term prevention.

In response to an evolving nicotine landscape, WDG Public Health continues to adapt its approach to maximize impact. This includes the introduction of a retailer-focused e-learning module aimed at improving understanding of regulatory requirements and supporting compliance, particularly among higher-risk vendors. By strengthening both enforcement and education at the point of sale, these efforts will help sustain progress and further reduce youth access to nicotine products.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- Population Health Assessment
- Health Equity
- Effective Public Health Practice
- Emergency Management

Program Standards

- Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- Food Safety
- Healthy Environments
- Healthy Growth and Development
- Immunization
- Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- Safe Water
- School Health
- Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- Improve health outcomes
- Focus on children's health
- Build strong partnerships
- Innovate our programs and services
- Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system