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To: Local Media

Date: November 22, 2011

Subject: Herbal Incense Products

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According to Steve Markham, Health Officer for the Dickinson-Iron District Health Department, it appears that some “designer” drugs that first made their appearance on the U.S. market around 2008, have recently emerged in our community as well and are being accessed particularly by teens and young adults seeking a “high.” He notes, “There are increasing reports nationally of adverse events related to these substances and side effects including nausea, anxiety, agitation, fast heart rate, paranoia, hallucinations and seizures.”

This group of drugs has been sold as a form of “herbal incense,” with product names such as “Spice”, “K2”, and “Yucatan Fire” and many others. They are touted as natural, herbal products and carefully labeled by the manufacturers as “not for human consumption,” All of these descriptions are false. These products are generally plant material that is sprayed with laboratory-made chemicals that are closely related to the active ingredient in marijuana, THC, but can act more aggressively and unpredictably within the brain, making them riskier to use. These compounds have not been well-studied and there is little scientific data about their short or long term safety.

The health department’s Medical Director, Dr. Terry Frankovich notes “There are currently over 140 variations of these chemicals, each altered slightly from the other. These variations are deliberate and meant to keep one step ahead of federal regulators. As soon as one variation is identified and classified as a regulated, Schedule I drug in the U.S.(meaning that it has a high abuse potential, has no legitimate medical usage and has no documented safety for use

even under medical supervision), a minor change is made in the chemical structure and a new product is manufactured and shipped. The labeling “not for human consumption” is meant to help it escape regulation, but its “high” with human use is advertised widely and the product itself is sold on the internet and in small shops selling tobacco or drug paraphernalia.” A handful of the products, including those used in “Spice” and “K2,” were marked as Schedule I by the FDA in March of this year, but non-banned variations of these products persist on the market.

Consumers, especially teens, are easily manipulated by marketing that suggests these products are safe and natural and legal. It would be ideal if we were able to pull these products off shelves as soon as they appear. But in reality, no sooner does one product get pulled than another takes its place and of course, the internet makes continued access possible regardless. States and the federal government will continue to work on controlling these substances, but it is important for us to realize, within our community, that in this day and age, the regulation process will always be behind the curve.

Dr. Frankovich emphasizes that because of the inherent challenges in trying to keep all of these current and future products from showing up on-line or on store shelves, it is critically important that we begin talking early and often to our children about making safe choices, weighing risks and being skeptical consumers. “We must help them to understand that when we take medication, for example, we know it has been developed carefully, manufactured under strict guidelines and tested extensively for safety before it is sold to the public—and even with all of these safeguards, there are unexpected side effects and problems...so we use medications only if and when they are truly needed. Emphasize how risky it is to use untested and unregulated substances created simply for quick profits and without concern for the health of the people using them. Teaching these skills will help protect our youth and our community over their lifetime.”

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