

April 22, 2023

Dear Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Ben Hagopian. I am a direct primary care doctor in South Portland. I received my medical and public health degrees from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH and trained in family medicine at Maine Medical Center. I have 10 years of experience providing high-quality integrative and primary healthcare in Maine and am submitting testimony in support of both LD 1215 and LD 1174, to end the sale of flavored tobacco products in our state.

As a physician, I see the detrimental effects addiction to tobacco has on my patients. Many of the adults I see who smoke, started smoking as youth – leading to decades of poor health. These individuals are more likely to develop the serious and costly chronic illnesses associated with tobacco use, including asthma, COPD, and cancer.

Some of my adult patients who smoke combustibles ask about using e-cigarettes to quit. While these devices are marketed as cessation devices, research shows that unfortunately, most e-cigarette users continue to smoke combustibles – also known as “dual use.” Furthermore, unlike FDA-approved cessation devices, like the Patch, the amount of nicotine they receive from the e-cigarette cannot be lessened over time. Given that one e-cigarette pod contains as much nicotine as an entire pack of cigarettes, it’s, unfortunately, more likely that individuals who use these devices to quit actually end up consuming more nicotine.

My patients include children as well, and over the course of my career, I have seen a dramatic increase in self-reported tobacco use among youth – driven entirely by flavored tobacco products. Some of these young patients are former athletes who can no longer compete because of their addiction. It’s no surprise – there are more than 15,000 flavored tobacco products on the market. With such an array, youth are naturally encouraged to try new flavors, and mix and match with friends. Product advertising, which includes attractive young people and colorful packaging, is widespread on media that targets youth (such as TikTok and Instagram).

My training in medicine and public health prepared me to both treat and prevent disease. If we can prevent young people from starting to smoke, we can prevent costly chronic illnesses that impair quality of life and lead to premature death.

We, as a community and state, share responsibility for ensuring our youth have a healthy and safe environment in which to grow and develop. Ending the sale of flavored tobacco products is part of that shared commitment. As a physician, father, and fellow Mainer, I urge the committee to support LD 1215 and LD 1174. Thank you for your service and consideration.