

Veerle Van Der Vekens
East Orland
LD 1215

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee.

My name is Veerle Van Der Vekens. I'm a volunteer with Parents Against Vaping e-cigarettes and I'm from East Orland. I am testifying today in support of LD 1215 to end the sale of all flavored tobacco products. I'd like to tell you my story.

My son was first introduced to vaping when he was about 15. During a bathroom break at his local high school, a friend offered him some "flavored fruit juice" to vape. He said it was just some "fruit juice", nothing harmful, nothing to worry about. My son innocently took a hit. His addiction to nicotine was swift. That was 8 years ago!

Since that day, "that harmless fruit juice" became the driving force in my son's life. He needs it to wake up in the morning, to feel better, to deal with his anxiety, to calm down, to get an appetite, to focus - to get through the day.

Vaping makes him cough incessantly, and leaves him struggling to breathe with the slightest exertion. He needs an inhaler and his lungs hurt- a lot. The little money he makes has gone to buying vapes.

What makes all of this much worse is that my son is a cancer survivor. At the young age of 6, he was diagnosed with leukemia. The suffering he went through is truly unimaginable! Our family barely survived through it all. Not a day goes by that his father and I take him for granted.

Addiction to vaping changed the course of his life again. This time he is facing a different kind of battle - a war against addiction and against a powerful tobacco and vaping industry. The same industry that floods my son's social media platforms with continuous images of the "ultimate vaping lifestyle" - Flashy commercials depicting how cool vaping is, catchy ads that keep introducing him to "the latest new flavors", messaging falsely claiming how harmless vaping is and how much healthier it is than smoking cigarettes. It's an industry that succeeds in recruiting new and innocent victims every day.

Everyone who knows my son is worried. At 23, he is grown now. We realize that he is the only one who can face his addiction and the only one who can change his life. He vapes every day and struggles to breathe. He has tried to quit many times and failed. He feels horrible about himself. His self-esteem is low, he is often depressed and feels so much shame about it all.

Now, finally, after 8 years, my son is about 65 days nicotine free - the longest time yet. He continues to struggle. While he feels better that he is off nicotine, he says that he realizes that it's the flavors that got him hooked in the first place. He craves fruit and minty menthol. He says missing the flavors will be the biggest impediment to his success.

I am angry. He is a good kid who already suffered way too much in his young life. He hasn't deserved any of this. I feel his pain, I see his many struggles. Why on earth would we not ban all flavored tobacco????!! It's the flavors that seduce our kids and it's the flavors that keep them hooked!

Thank you for this time.