

April 25, 2023

Testimony in Support of LD 1215: An Act to End the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products

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

My name is Melissa Fochesato, I am a member of the Maine Network of Healthy Communities, and a resident of Brunswick. I am providing testimony in support of LD1215 on behalf of the Maine Network of Healthy Communities, and its president, Jamie Comstock.

The Maine Network of Healthy Communities is an organization whose membership includes the majority of community health coalitions in Maine. These coalitions work within local communities, alongside community members and community organizations to create and support environments that improve residents' health.

Our organization predates the creation of the Fund for a Healthy Maine and most of our member organizations have been involved in local tobacco prevention for several decades.

As you can imagine we were ecstatic in 2009 when the Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey reported the past 30 day high school smoking rate had dropped to 5%, the lowest we had ever seen. Our collective hard work was paying off. But all that started to change around 2013 when we saw the popularity of vaping increase.

In the 2021 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey ¹⁷18% of Maine high school students said they'd used an electronic vaping device in the past 30 days, which is an indicator of frequent use in the community health field.

Post COVID, schools returned to in person instruction, and parents, teachers and administrators from all over the state are reaching out to our members with increased frequency and urgency, asking for support and assistance in managing youth vaping. They described it as "one of the

biggest issues impacting schools today,” impacting the school experience of both users and non-users alike.

We have flavors to thank for that.

We know the facts.

- Flavors open the door to the tobacco world for most young people. If the products smelled and tasted like traditional tobacco products young people wouldn't bother with them.
- The nicotine level in vape e-juice is far higher than traditional tobacco products. As a result many young people have developed nicotine addiction that has proven to be very hard to beat.
- Historically the tobacco industry has used flavors to make all types of their products more appealing to youth, including chewing tobacco.
- The tobacco industry has also used menthol to increase tobacco use by young people, women, people living in poverty, people of color and people who identify as LGBTQ.

Limiting access to flavored products is a key disease prevention strategy and is a US CDC-recognized BEST practice. Several Maine communities, including my own town of Brunswick, have already adopted flavor sales bans - with encouraging results - but a state approach would be much more effective.

We will continue to work on the ground in our communities to eliminate exposure to secondhand smoke, prevent nicotine initiation among youth, and promote quitting and treatment resources for adults and youth. And we need you - the legislature - to provide a strong policy framework - without loopholes - so we can remove these dangerous products from the shelves. We need you to stand up to the tobacco industry, in what could be the biggest win for public health, and our kids, in Maine.