

Testimony of Kendra Connelly
In support of
LD 1215, An Act to End the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and members of the committee. My name is Kendra Connelly and I live in Portland. I am a constituent of Representative Zager and I am here to speak in support of LD 1215.

I am a mother, grandmother, and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker whose work includes counseling young people who have a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance use disorder. I have done this work in Maine for about 20 years. These days, I mostly work with young women in their 20s who are in recovery from substance use disorder. I also sit on the Board of Directors of the Portland Recovery Community Center, known as PRCC.

I can tell you that flavored tobacco, particularly flavored Juul pods and vaping products like them, are causing incalculable damage to the lives of young people across our state. Kids as early as middle school are being introduced to these products filled with addictive chemicals and they are getting hooked almost instantly. The combination of the sweet, fruity flavors, the alluring packaging, the intense head-rush, and the pure nicotine is a cocktail that opens up an addiction pathway in thousands of young Mainers each year.

In addition to physical effects that are still being understood, that early addiction leads to a host of other problems, including depression and anxiety. And, it can lead directly to even more serious addiction and substance-seeking behavior.

I have seen this in my work and, more intimately, from my own daughters. Today, they are 20 and 22 years-old, respectively. The older is in recovery from her nicotine addiction, though it took her more than 10 attempts to quit. The younger one is still under the spell of this stuff. They both knew something about the dangers of vaping but neither was prepared for the near-instant addiction when they first experimented with the pretty colored Juul or vape pens that were passed around at school.

You might ask why I didn't do more to stop it or why I allowed it to start in the first place. It's a question I ask myself sometimes as well, but the truth is, I didn't know about it until they were firmly in the grip of a nicotine addiction. Countless times, I attempted to end their use by literally smashing vape pens in our driveway anytime I found them. But within a few weeks another one turned up in the wash, if not an empty plastic pod.

The insidious nature of these delivery devices is that they are nearly undetectable, even a few seconds after use. This makes it difficult for a teacher, counselor, or parent to ever know what their child may be up to.

So today, I am asking for your support for all of us who are trying to help Maine kids to get a health start in life. Please support this ban on flavored tobacco products which are setting too many of our children on a pathway toward addiction that may not stop with bubble gum flavored Juul pods.