

Testimony in support of LD 1215
An Act To End the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products
From: The Board of Directors of Healthy Acadia
April 25, 2023

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: My name is Art Blank and I live in Bar Harbor. I am a retired CEO for Mount Desert Island Hospital and I am speaking to you today from the perspective of having spent my entire healthcare career in Maine and as a member of the Healthy Acadia Board of Directors. We are a nonprofit community health organization serving primarily Hancock and Washington counties and also partnering with other organizations to deliver services across the state. We are speaking in favor of LD 1215, An Act To End the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products.

My colleagues on the board are a diverse group of community representatives including parents, retirees, business owners, medical professionals, and others. We care deeply about the health and well-being of our community members. This includes increasing access for all to the health resources which help everyone to live fulfilled, meaningful lives and in turn, to build thriving communities.

One of Healthy Acadia's focus areas is Tobacco and Substance Use Prevention and another is Strong Beginnings; these two topics are highlighted in the proposed flavored tobacco ban. It is imperative to protect our children, both in our service areas and across the state, from youth tobacco initiation and to fight predatory practices by the tobacco industry. Flavors and aggressive marketing tactics, including targeted marketing, are what the tobacco industry uses to get young people hooked- because it's the flavors themselves that keep the kids coming back. The USCDC reports that in 2022, 85.5% of high school students and 81.5% of middle school students who used e-cigarettes in the past 30 days reported using a flavored e-cigarette during that time.¹ And the American Heart Association reports that 70% of teens say that the flavors are a key reason why they use them.²

We know that once youth are addicted to nicotine, it's very, very difficult to quit- some say that quitting prescription drugs is less difficult than quitting smoking. I can speak to how powerfully addictive it is, and how difficult it is to quit, as a former smoker who began at a young age in a household where both of my parents smoked. I quit dozens of times but didn't remain quit until hospitals were required in Maine to close their smoking lounges.

In spite of the addictiveness of nicotine, however, 70% of current smokers- this includes current menthol users- want to quit, according to the FDA.³ Another way of saying this is that at any one time, nearly 3/4ths of all people using tobacco want to quit. They aren't using tobacco because they want to, they're using it because they have to- because they are addicted. They became addicted because we allowed tobacco companies to prey on them as youth, in the name of continued industry profits, and it has been to our communities' detriment.

We are not doing our youth community members a favor by allowing the tobacco industry predatory practices to go on. And we are not doing our adult community members a favor by treating their nicotine addiction as though it is something fairly harmless: addiction and personal choice are two very different things, and we have the statistics to show that nicotine addiction is deadly, expensive, and sneaky:

- nearly half a million people every year die from tobacco-related illness, more than alcohol, AIDS, car accidents, illegal drugs, murders, and suicides combined⁴
- Nearly \$1.5 billion a year is lost to our economy due to lost productivity and health-related costs, according to the Tobacco Free Maine Works⁵
- Multiple studies, including one shared by the Truth Initiative, have shown that anxiety and depression rises in people using nicotine⁶
- And, according to studies referenced by the MaineHealth Center for Tobacco Independence, tobacco/nicotine use in youth increases susceptibility to experimentation with other substances, increases substance use in those using both nicotine and other substances, and negatively impacts efforts to quit using other substances during recovery.

When we dismiss the effects of a nicotine addiction and de-emphasize the importance of preventing youth initiation, we are failing our community members and we are failing our communities: If we are concerned that banning menthol will remove adult access to products that they are dependent on, then the solution isn't to stop banning menthol, the solution is to ban it and to provide increased treatment resources. If we are concerned that it will be misidentified as some sort of governmental overreach, the solution is to ban it and ALSO provide comprehensive education and outreach regarding the benefits of a ban for everyone. If we are concerned that people will go elsewhere for tobacco products, then the solution is not to not ban it at all, but rather to ban it everywhere.

And if we are concerned about the effectiveness of this strategy, consider the 2022 National Drug Control report: the suggested approach to reducing the death toll from overdoses includes reducing supply, providing access to treatment and resources, and increasing harm reduction/

prevention services⁷. We need to remember that nicotine is an addictive drug as well, and we must treat it as such. The 2022 National Drug Control report's solutions apply to nicotine as well. The opportunity in front of us during this legislative session is to help reduce supply by banning flavored tobacco products.

Please protect our children and other vulnerable populations in our community by voting "yes" to support LD 1215, a ban on the sale of flavored tobacco products.

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/youth_data/tobacco_use/index.htm

² <https://flavorshookkidscolorado.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FastFacts.pdf>

³ <https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/health-effects-tobacco-use/what-its-quit-smoking#:~:text=In%202015%2C%20nearly%2070%20percent,said%20they%20wanted%20to%20quit.&text=In%202018%2C%20about%2055%20percent,quitting%20for%206%2D12%20months>

⁴ tobaccofreekids.org

⁵ <https://tobaccofreemainetworks.org/>

⁶ <https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/emerging-tobacco-products/colliding-crises-youth-mental-health-and-nicotine-use>

⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/National-Drug-Control-2022Strategy.pdf>