



CITY OF BANGOR

Testimony of Jamie Comstock,
Health Promotion Manager,
City of Bangor's Public Health and Community Services Department

Before the Health and Human Services Committee
Testimony in Support of: LR 1550: An Act to End the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products

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

My name is Jamie Comstock. I am the Health Promotion Manager at the City of Bangor's Public Health and Community Services Department and I am providing testimony in support of LD 1550.

I have directed our department's tobacco prevention efforts since 2007. Since 2015 we've been providing tobacco prevention services throughout Penobscot and Piscataquis counties as part of Maine Prevention Services.

We don't get a lot of wins in this work. In every situation the addiction industries - regardless of whether we are talking tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana - are set up to win because they have more money. And they use their money to advertise in many different ways with the singular goal of creating lifelong frequent users who will feed *their* money right back into the addiction machine. The tobacco industry, especially, has engaged in egregious practices, like pummeling kids with ads, cheap pricing in more vulnerable neighborhoods, and with flavors designed specifically to turn kids into users.

For fun, the next time you go to a convenience store check out the number of tobacco ads you see. And then pay special attention to the ads that are at eye level for a child. This is how the tobacco industry exploits the institution of the neighborhood corner store to first initiate kids to their products.

In 2009 Maine celebrated a 64% reduction in high school smoking rates. It was amazing and we were ecstatic. But all that started to change around 2013 when we saw the popularity of vaping increase.

In the 2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey 28% of Maine high school students said they'd used an electronic vapor device in the last 30 days which, in the prevention field is an indicator of frequent use.

At the health department we speak often with parents, teachers, and administrators and they all say that vaping is one of the biggest issues impacting schools today. Vaping transcends both income and social groups and has permeated every corner of school life. No one is immune. Vaping is an equal opportunity addiction.

Parents tell us about their kids who have developed intense and albatross-like nicotine addictions, addictions these kids developed because they were misled by an industry who promoted the vapor as "harmless water vapor" in yummy carnival-like flavors. These addictions aren't easy to beat and instead of focusing on school activities and accomplishments, outings with friends, and looking forward to a future beyond high school, these kids are servants to their addictions, preoccupied with the who, what, where, and how of getting their next nicotine fix. It's shameful that the tobacco industry has robbed them of their youth and will do anything it can to rob them of the rest of their lives too.

We are working on the ground as hard as we can, but we are no match for the tobacco industry. We need you - the legislature - to do your part by providing a strong policy framework so we can remove these dangerous products from the shelves and continue to do our best work with youth and communities. We need you to stand up to the tobacco industry, in what could be the biggest win for tobacco prevention in Maine.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'd be pleased to take any questions.

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