

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: my name is Darlene Huntress, I live in Hollis, and I'm on the board of directors of EqualityMaine. I'm testifying in favor of LD 1550, An Act To End the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products.

I am a former smoker. I had my first cigarette when I was 19 and I had my last one five years ago when I was 52. In between those 30-plus years I "quit" smoking so many times I lost count and so at some point I started saying "I've stopped smoking but I'm not sure that I've quit". And even though it's been five years since my last cigarette, I still say that. Even though I feel healthier than I have in years, even though food tastes better and my lungs are clearer, even though I know that every day without a cigarette adds precious time to my life, I still say that I'm not sure if I've quit. I know that I'm only one cigarette away from not caring about any of that because I'm addicted and nicotine is a crafty drug. If I could pick just one thing to do differently in my life it would be to never EVER have taken that first drag off that first cigarette.

And that's why I feel compelled to testify here today. I have seen the wide range of flavored tobacco products that are now being produced and marketed by the tobacco industry, and I'm alarmed and disgusted by it. There are flavors out there like "Banana Blast," "Pop Tart," and "Cotton Candy", all packaged in bright colors that are clearly designed to attract kids. It alarms me because it's working: 4 out of 5 teenagers who have ever used tobacco started with a flavored product. It disgusts me because the tobacco industry is barely trying to hide the fact that they are cultivating a new, younger generation of addicted lifelong customers. This has a particular impact for my community. LGBTQ young adults are nearly twice as likely to use tobacco as their non-LGBTQ counterparts, and over 40 percent of LGBTQ young adults are occasional cigarette smokers.

Young people overwhelmingly use flavored tobacco instead of traditional tobacco, a direct result of predatory industry marketing. Without these dessert and fruit flavored products, a lot of them may

have never started the dangerous habit of smoking in the first place. As lawmakers, you have the power to do something to protect our young people from these targeted products and the predatory marketing that pushes them on our kids. I hope you choose to act by voting Ought to Pass on LD 550.