



Preserving Hookah Culture & Protecting Hookah Tradition across the USA

Maine Legislature
Committee On Health and Human Services
February 9, 2022

Re: Amend LD 1693 – Exempt Hookah

Chairman Claxton, Chairwoman Meyer and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share our position on LD 1693.

My name is Chris Hudgins and I serve on the board of the National Hookah Community Association (NHCA), representing my company, Al Fakher. NHCA brings together, and serves as the voice of, hookah producers, distributors, sellers, lounge owners, consumers, and community members who support the preservation of hookah's cultural traditions. We are writing to request that you follow the lead of other jurisdictions, including the state of California, and **exempt hookah from the flavored tobacco ban contained in Part D of LD 1693.**

Hookah is an important cultural practice that has existed for centuries, originating in the Middle East and India. Today, a broad cross-section of immigrants in the U.S. from around the world enjoy hookah as a centerpiece for cultural, business, and social gatherings. Hookah is widely used by Middle Eastern, Armenian, Turkish, East African, Indian, Persian, Indonesian, and other minority immigrant citizens. Hookah lounges across the country have come to serve as safe gathering places for many diverse ethnic and religious communities. Despite the importance of this social practice and tradition, NHCA members continue to find that many policymakers are often unfamiliar with hookah, its practice, and its community.

NHCA fully supports efforts to eliminate youth access and usage of tobacco products, including hookah. Hookah is unlikely to be used or consumed by youth for many reasons. Hookah water pipes are several feet tall, not easily concealed, and the setup for use is a lengthy process. Lounges that offer hookah are restricted to of-age customers, preventing teens from accessing the product. Recent research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that just 2.1% of middle and high school students used hookah in the past 30 days, five times less than the number of teens or youth who vape.

Shisha, the product used in hookah, is a combination of tobacco and a sugar substance such as honey or molasses, and the total product is only comprised of approximately 15% tobacco. As has been the practice for hundreds of years, hookah is, by nature, a flavored product. Unfortunately, noble efforts to address the teen vaping epidemic by **banning flavored tobacco also would result in the ban of ALL hookah.**

A ban on hookah would not only eliminate this important cultural practice for many U.S. citizens, but could also shutter many small, independent, and minority owned businesses. Many of these businesses serve as community gathering places for immigrant populations in cities across the country. Many hookah users are part



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of religious or ethnic populations that already face discrimination. Eliminating this cultural practice would make many feel as though they are misunderstood and targeted as an outsider by lawmakers and regulators.

We ask that you do not vote to shutter minority and immigrant owned business. Please include an exemption for hookah in LD 1693.

National Hookah Community Association