



S. 18- An act relating to banning flavored tobacco products and e-liquids
House Human Services Committee
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Planned Parenthood of Northern New England provides comprehensive reproductive and sexual health care to more than 16,000 people in Vermont at seven health centers located in Burlington, Williston, St. Johnsbury, Barre, White River Junction, Rutland, and Brattleboro. People turn to us for affordable, high-quality care including wellness exams, birth control, disease testing and treatment, cancer screenings, abortion care as well as a variety of primary care services. We see everyone who comes to us regardless of ability to pay, and 59% of our patients have low incomes (defined as less than twice the Federal Poverty level). In a typical year, we provide approximately \$1 million in free and discounted care to our communities in Vermont each year.

As an organization providing reproductive health care, many of our patients are younger, are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and are less likely to have a relationship with a primary care provider. Our patients are more likely to disclose issues like substance use, mental health concerns, or intimate partner violence in a health center like Planned Parenthood than in other settings. It is from this perspective that I submit this testimony.

The truth is that tobacco does not taste good, smoking— at least for beginners can be a harsh, irritating, experience. Why then, do people smoke? The answer in a word— nicotine. Recent studies have shown that nicotine literally rewires how the brain processes dopamine, over time shifting an initial neurological reaction of aversion *and* reward to one overwhelmingly of reward¹.

Throughout its history the Tobacco Industry has designed its products and the marketing for them in order to expand market share and attract new customers in large part to overcome this initial reaction of revulsion. These efforts, be they through marketing— often targeted at disadvantaged populations such as women and people of color— or through adjusting the products themselves via things like manipulating nicotine levels and taste are all designed with a singular purpose— to create new customers with an addictive craving that their products can fulfill. Eliminating the sale of flavored tobacco products, including menthol, promotes health equity.

The explosion in flavored tobacco products in recent years is a particularly insidious example of these efforts with flavors and marketing clearly designed to appeal to younger people. By

¹Taryn E. Grieder, Morgane Besson, Geith Maal-Bared and Derek van der Kooy. “ β_2^* nAChRs on VTA dopamine and GABA neurons separately mediate nicotine aversion and reward”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, November 27, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908724116>



masking the harshness and soothing the irritation caused by tobacco smoke, flavors like cherry crush, birthday cake or candy cane menthol (actual flavored tobacco flavors), make it easier for beginners – primarily youth – to experiment with tobacco and ultimately become addicted. In short, flavors hook kids. This is intentional. The tobacco companies know that 95% of adult smokers start by age 21. The flavored products aren't for adults – tobacco companies are purposefully designing and marketing products to our children to get them addicted to nicotine.

The awful truth is that these efforts are working, four out of five youth who have ever used tobacco products started with a flavored product and as you have heard from experts in our schools, with the introduction of e-liquids, tobacco use among Vermont youth has been increasing.

While laying out the myriad negative effects of tobacco use of any method are far beyond the scope of this testimony, I want to highlight for you all that the impacts of prolonged tobacco use regardless of consumption method are numerous and profound on Reproductive Health alone. This impacts include but are not limited to a reduction in fertility, negative impacts on hormone production, damaging the DNA of sperm and the potential for increased incidence of ectopic pregnancy. If one does become pregnant while using tobacco, the impacts can be even more severe– smoking during pregnancy has a demonstrated linkage to pregnancy complications up to and including miscarriage and death, as well as significant impacts on fetal health leading to low birth weight, retardation of lung development, birth defects such as cleft lip and/or cleft palate and an increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)².

Eliminating the sale of flavored tobacco and e-liquids is a proven successful public health strategy. Massachusetts passed similar legislation in November 2019 eliminating the sale of flavored and menthol tobacco products. **From 2019 to 2021, youth smoking rates decreased from 4.3% to 2.9% and youth vaping rates decreased from 32% to 17.6%. Adult cigarette smoking declined from 12.1% to 10.6%.** Our usage rates in Vermont are such that we cannot afford to wait on the FDA or federal legislation to protect Vermonters from the harms of flavored tobacco products of all varieties. S. 18 is an incredibly important public health measure that will help our state protect children and other vulnerable populations from an industry which seeks to rob them of their health.

Planned Parenthood of Northern New England (PPNNE) is the largest provider of reproductive and sexual health care across the State of Vermont. We serve Vermont residents through 7 health centers in St. Johnsbury, Rutland, Brattleboro, Barre, Burlington, Williston, and White River Junction. Last year we saw more than 16,000 patients at these sites. [PPNNE was named a 2021 Guardian of Excellence Award® winner](#) by Press Ganey, the national leader in health care consumer and workforce engagement. Press Ganey recognizes PPNNE as a top-

² FDA, "How Smoking Affects Reproductive Health", <https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/health-effects-tobacco-use/how-smoking-affects-reproductive-health>



performing health care organization, achieving the 95th percentile or above for performance in patient experience, out of more than 20,000 medical practices.