

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota

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March 9, 2021

Rep. Mike Freiberg, Chair
Rep. Robert Bierman, Vice Chair
Rep. Glenn Gruenhagen
Rep. Patty Acomb
Rep. Esther Agbaje
Rep. Andrew Carlson

Rep. Mary Franson
Rep. Josh Heintzeman
Rep. Kelly Morrison
Rep. Laurie Pryor
Rep. Tina Liebling

RE: HF 1721 (comprehensive tobacco tax and funding bill)

Dear Chair Freiberg and Committee Members:

I am writing to urge you to support **HF 1721**, a bill that includes comprehensive commercial tobacco tax changes and funding for tobacco prevention and treatment.

As the largest health plan in Minnesota, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is committed to improving the health of all Minnesotans, which is why we strongly support statewide policy change such as this bill. For decades, Blue Cross has supported policies that address commercial tobacco use and addiction and this bill offers two key components with proven success: raising tobacco prices and funding for prevention and treatment, both of which are more needed than ever.

An epidemic of e-cigarette use has disrupted a downward trend in youth tobacco use overall. According to the 2020 Minnesota Youth Tobacco Survey, one in five high schoolers reported using e-cigarettes in the past 30 days and 70 percent of youth e-cigarette users reported signs of nicotine dependence. This policy will have a direct impact on reducing youth access to these products.

The tobacco industry, which includes e-cigarette manufacturers, uses menthol, candy and fruit-flavored tobacco products to attract the next generation of smokers. Their targets are undeniably young people, but because of predatory marketing, they also attract Black people, American Indians and LGBTQ individuals. Nine out of ten Black adult smokers use menthol tobacco, compared to 29 percent of white adult smokers.

Raising commercial tax prices help prevent youth from initiating commercial tobacco use and helps current users quit. Along with the price increases, the dedication of funds for tobacco prevention and treatment programs offers a comprehensive approach to address the leading cause of premature death and disease in Minnesota – commercial tobacco use and addiction.

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In 2017, Blue Cross released a study showing that each year, smoking claims over 6,000 Minnesota lives and costs our state **\$7.5 billion** in health care costs and lost productivity. This bill would serve to raise revenue and reduce health care costs directly caused by commercial tobacco use.

ClearWay Minnesota, created as a life-limited foundation out of the original tobacco settlement, has provided the majority of tobacco prevention funding in Minnesota and will officially end operations at the end of this year. This bill would fill a crucial gap in commercial tobacco prevention and treatment programs for Minnesota.

I hope you will take this positive step toward making a smoke-free generation for all Minnesotans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Steffen', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Steffen, M.D., M.P.H.
Vice President, Chief Medical Officer
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota