

March 10, 2021

Minnesota House Preventive Health Policy Division

Dear Chair Freiberg and Committee Members:

I'm writing to you on behalf of the Minnesota Society for Public Health Education (MN SOPHE) an organization of more than 80 members that share a common goal of promoting the profession of health education and health promotion and improving our communities' health. We are writing to urge you to **support HF1721**, which includes comprehensive tobacco tax changes and funding for prevention and treatment. A tobacco price increase is overdue in Minnesota, and would be a major win for health and Minnesota kids. Furthermore, now is the time to end the tax break on premium cigars, tax e-cigarette devices as tobacco products and conform to federal e-cigarette online sales rules to help our state keep pace with the ever-evolving tobacco industry.

Raising commercial tobacco prices helps prevent young people from using tobacco products, helps smokers quit and saves lives. The youth tobacco epidemic has erased decades of progress to reduce youth tobacco use. Price is a powerful tool, since research finds that young people are two to three times more responsive than adults to tobacco price increases. Every 10 percent increase in cigarette prices reduces youth smoking by more than 5 percent and youth initiation by 10 percent.

Investing more funds in tobacco prevention and treatment ensures Minnesota is taking a wrap-around approach to stopping commercial tobacco's harms. Higher tobacco prices – coupled with dedicated funding – are urgently needed to address Minnesota's stalled adult smoking rates and youth tobacco epidemic. The 2020 Minnesota Youth Tobacco Survey found one in five high-schoolers used e-cigarettes within the past 30 days, and 70 percent of youth e-cigarette users reported signs of dependence.

Minnesota needs a comprehensive, all-hands-on-deck approach to protect the next generation from lifelong tobacco addiction – including high prices and dedicated prevention funding. For more than two decades ClearWay MinnesotaSM, the foundation created with 3 percent of the tobacco settlement, has provided the majority of funding for tobacco prevention in Minnesota. ClearWay Minnesota will sunset at the end of 2021, leaving a gap in prevention resources. Last year, Minnesota took in nearly \$760 million in tobacco revenue and spent only 1 percent of that total on commercial tobacco prevention and treatment.

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuates the need for strong tobacco prevention and treatment programs. Current and former smokers are at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19. To make matters worse, communities targeted by the tobacco industry, including Black and Indigenous Minnesotans, are some of the hardest hit by COVID-19.

Increasing tobacco taxes is a triple win for Minnesota because it will raise revenue while reducing health care costs and improving health. The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network and Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids estimate that a \$1.50 per pack increase would lead to major health gains, including 13,200 fewer kids becoming adult smokers, 24,300 adult smokers quitting and \$800 million in long-term health savings.

In closing, the majority of Minnesotans support increasing tobacco prevention funding and tobacco tax. A 2020 poll found 62 percent of Minnesotans favor increasing tobacco taxes and dedicating that revenue to funding prevention efforts. And 64 percent of Minnesota residents support increasing state funding for youth tobacco prevention by \$15 million a year.

Once again, we encourage you to adopt this lifesaving bill. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Derek Hersch
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