



LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTION PARTNERSHIP

ADVANCING JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY SOLUTIONS

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Date: February 13th, 2020

Re: SB233 - Business Regulation - Flavored Tobacco Products - Prohibition

Position: OPPOSE

To: Senate Finance Committee

Distinguished Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am representing myself as a retired Baltimore patrol officer, community policing officer, and detective, and as a speaker for the Law Enforcement Action Partnership (LEAP). LEAP is a nonprofit group of police, prosecutors, judges, and other criminal justice professionals who speak from firsthand experience to endorse evidence-based public safety policies. Our mission is to make communities safer by focusing law enforcement resources on the most serious priorities, promoting alternatives to arrest and incarceration, addressing the root causes of crime, and healing police-community relations.

My colleagues and I at LEAP oppose SB233 because it will harm the fragile relationships police depend on to keep neighborhoods safe.

Every officer knows relationships are key to solving crime. When we need tips and witnesses, we have to talk to people in our communities. If they do not trust us enough, our work is nearly impossible. Right now, too many people fear and distrust police more than they want to help solve crime. They don't return our calls or answer the door when we need information. It is a sad reality that demoralizes and disheartens us. I would put on my uniform every day with the goal of serving and protecting others, and I had to put in extra work just to rebuild broken bridges so that people would trust me.

SB233 includes a ban on menthol cigarettes, the overwhelming choice of Black smokers.¹ With this demand for menthol cigarettes, I guarantee you that people will drive truckloads of cartons in from other states and sell them on the corner to make a quick profit. Then storeowners will call the police to

¹ <https://www.lung.org/stop-smoking/smoking-facts/tobacco-use-racial-and-ethnic.html>

enforce the ban, which means more searches and arrests in Black communities. This type of low-level enforcement is exactly the type of interaction that makes communities of color resent police. SB233 would drive yet another wedge into the relationships officers like me have worked so hard to repair.

We can already see the results of tasking law enforcement with policing illegal cigarette markets. In New York City, Eric Garner, a father of six, was choked to death by police while being arrested for selling loose cigarettes. Black communities across the country remember Eric Garner's name. We do not need more opportunities for police and communities of color to interact with each other over issues like cigarettes. We have to move beyond criminal approaches to drug issues and leave this issue to public health professionals.

Putting police in charge of reducing nicotine use is like asking a dentist to perform brain surgery – just because there is a medical concern about the head does not mean a dentist is qualified to ensure a successful outcome.

Detective Debbie Ramsey (Ret.)
Speaker, Law Enforcement Action Partnership
Baltimore Police Department

*This testimony does not necessarily represent the views of the department.