

January 28, 2021

Dear Chair Kelley and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

I am writing to you on behalf of MoCo for Public Health (MCPH) in support of SB 177 - "Business Regulation - Flavored Tobacco Products - Prohibition" and would like to thank the Committee for taking on this important issue and for working to combat the deadly crisis associated with Tobacco products in the state of Maryland. As the Co-Chief of MCPH, I join my team members and other organizations like Montgomery County Student Government Association (MCR-SGA) and DC Teens for Action in joining the Maryland Youth Against Flavored Tobacco (MD YAFT) Coalition.

As a member of this coalition I've had the opportunity to meet with many other organizations, teens, young kids, and adults to discuss how flavored tobacco has affected us all. We've also met to educate each other and the general public on exactly how negatively flavored tobacco has affected high and middle school students, and the adult population. From the first-hand experiences many of us students have on how flavored tobacco affected our friends and peers to seeing our loved ones health deteriorate, along with the large amount of research and studies done on the harm of flavored tobacco, the answer is clear—flavored tobacco has to go.

Today you have the chance to make this happen and I ask that you vote in favor of SB 177. But as you make this decision I want you to keep the first hand experiences with flavored tobacco that my fellow peers, friends, and the youth of Maryland have had in mind.

The first time I truly saw the negative impact of flavored tobacco in school was in the 8th grade when a group of students decided to skip class to use JUUL inside a bathroom just outside of my 2nd period U.S. History class. As my classmates and I learned about how various historical figures stood up for themselves throughout history, my peers missed out on this valuable learning, forming gaps in their education. As students from nearby classes utilized the bathroom, commotion began to stir about what was happening. Some students came back worried about the path that their friends were going down, others unfortunately felt pressured to join in on the terrible activity. Eventually the teachers caught on and a group of them stopped their classes mid-lecture to dismantle the situation. Our precious class time was wasted because of an addictive flavored tobacco product.

However, just because teachers broke up one instance of kids vaping doesn't mean they fixed the issue. I see those same peers and as the years have gone on, more and more of them falling into the trap of flavored tobacco products. I see them so desperate to hit their JUUL that they do it right before starting a test. I see them coming late to class because their "one last hit" spiraled out of their control. I see them struggling in school as a result of their addiction. I see them afraid to admit what they're going through. I see them looking at the anti-vape and flavored tobacco awareness posters hanging around school hallways with unease and guilt in their eyes, but yet a hand in their pocket clutching their JUUL, wishing so deeply that they could stop. If only they could just stop. But they can't just stop.

Not when there are Big Tobacco companies willing to sacrifice the lives of my peers and my friends just for a couple more million dollars in their ever growing pockets. Not when flavored tobacco companies willingly spend millions and millions of dollars just to inch themselves into every aspect of our lives by advertising on Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Youtube, and everywhere else we go—attached to us better than our own shadows.

To my peers, combatting their addiction to flavored tobacco seems impossible. It seems like a dream that's deferred everytime they fail sobriety. For you this is not impossible. For you have the power to revive their ever longing dreams. Senators and members of the committee I urge you to support the passage of SB 177. Your one decision will change the lives of many students and residents of Maryland. It will have a rippling effect in all aspects of all our lives for the better. Supporting SB 177 - "Business Regulation - Flavored Tobacco Products - Prohibition," would be a huge leap forward in the academic, personal, emotional, and social success of students around Maryland.

Sincerely,

Aliza Zulfiqar
MoCo for Public Health
Maryland Youth Against Tobacco Coalition