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Greetings, my name is Walkiria Pool, President and Founder of Centro de Apoyo Familiar (CAF), and I am writing on behalf on this organization. I am writing to urge you to support HB 134/SB 177, ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products in Maryland. As a legislator, you have a responsibility to protect our children and communities from a toxic product that kills 7,500 people in Maryland each year and is actively hooking an entirely new generation of kids.

My organization works continuously to empower underserved communities and continuing to allow the sale of flavored tobacco leads to lifelong poverty and struggle. These young people cannot be targeted with products that endanger their lives and lower their quality of life. I have four beautiful children and am part of a community with so many bright young people. So many young people and children do not understand the life long implications of tobacco usage and addiction to nicotine and other substances. Facilitating this addiction by allowing the sale of flavored tobacco is unconscionable. Almost a quarter of Maryland high school students currently use e-cigarettes, and 80% of young people who have ever used tobacco started with a flavored product.

The majority of kid users say they were drawn to tobacco because it tasted good - this is not surprising given that e-cigarettes come in flavors like cotton candy, watermelon, and gummy bear. Through targeted marketing and candy-flavored products clearly meant to appeal to kids, we now have an epidemic of youth tobacco use plaguing our state.

Tobacco companies also target Black and Brown communities through menthol cigarette advertising, product discounts, and giveaways. Like other flavored products, menthol masks the harsh taste of tobacco, making it easier for people to start smoking. As a result, about 85% of African American smokers today use menthol cigarettes, the last flavor of cigarette still allowed on the market. This has led to a devastating and disproportionate burden of suffering in Black and Brown communities.

The sale of flavored tobacco products undeniably leads Marylanders to lifelong struggles with addiction, sickness, and suffering. I urge you to support passage of HB 134/SB 177 to end the sale of ALL flavored tobacco products.