

January 28, 2021

Dear Chair Kelley and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Maryland Youth Against Flavored Tobacco Coalition to support SB 177 - "Business Regulation - Flavored Tobacco Products - Prohibition." Our coalition is composed of many youth-led organizations that are both county-wide such as the Montgomery County Student Government Association (MCR-SGA) and state-wide such as Maryland Youth For Change. We have met in the past few weeks to discuss our experiences with flavored tobacco. After speaking with numerous Maryland teens in middle and high school through this coalition, I strongly believe flavored tobacco is a problem for all age groups. My personal experience with flavored tobacco exemplifies this.

I was in seventh grade when *Beth, a friend of mine since elementary school, began using an e-cigarette called JUUL. When I confronted her about this, I was met with bewilderment. Beth couldn't fathom why I was so concerned about her because she insisted JUUL wasn't as bad as smoking. I remember telling her, my friend who had spent her whole life swimming and wanted to compete in the Olympics, that JUUL would get her kicked off that advanced team. Beth didn't talk to me for a while after that. Within the next few months, I witnessed more of my peers start to use JUUL. Straight-A middle school students with bright futures ahead of them fell prey to the lure of Big Bad Tobacco. I felt sick watching my warnings to them go unheard.

Towards the end of the school year, there was an anti-tobacco assembly because teachers and parents had also noticed the increase in tobacco use among middle schoolers. We sat in the gym listening to how JUUL contained as much nicotine as 20 cigarettes. This fact has stuck with me to this day because it counteracted Beth's argument of "JUUL isn't as bad." Speaking of Beth, she approached me again after that presentation. I still remember her shaking hands and nervous twitches, partially because the presentation had spooked her and partially because she used tobacco for so long by then. She confessed to me how bad it's gotten for her. When she tried to stop a few weeks ago, she failed. She described how withdrawal was everything we read about in our sixth-grade health class. The chills, headaches, insomnia, nicotine cravings, and more. She had even begun dry-swallowing Advil to ease the pain, but gave up and returned to JUUL. She made me promise not to tell anyone.

This was the worst position I have ever been put in; having to choose our friendship or her health. Of course, I chose her health and told my counselor who got the school and her parents involved. Beth didn't speak to me ever since and the worst part is, my sacrifice was in vain. When we returned in eighth grade, I heard rumors of Beth JUULing at parties and sometimes even drinking. I wasn't surprised because whenever I saw her in the halls, I could tell by her pale and miserable expression that tobacco addiction was a constant struggle. Flashforward to ninth grade and I heard she wasn't on the school swim team anymore. Although I don't know if she was kicked off or quit, I knew it was because of her indulgence in nicotine and alcohol. I heard from lowerclassmen and upperclassmen alike of her actions.

I have known too many Beth's in my academic career, some stories worse than others. This experience hurts the most because I lost a friend and the world lost a potential Olympic gold medalist. There were also race factors that came into play as more of my Black and Brown peers used flavored tobacco products. Imagine how this fuels the opportunity gap. I beg you all to not let another Beth be created in Maryland. Don't put another 13-year-old girl in the worst position of choosing between her friend or the greater good. I urge you all to choose the greater good now so no one is forced to make that decision themselves. Big Tobacco has targeted and exploited my community, but we can end this. I urge you to support the passage of a clean SB 177 - "Business Regulation - Flavored Tobacco Products - Prohibition."

Respectfully Submitted,

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Maryland Youth Against Tobacco Coalition

All names have been changed for privacy concerns.