

**TESTIMONY OF
Charles Debnam
African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council
BEFORE THE MARYLAND GOVERNMENT LABOR AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE**

April 3, 2026

Chair and Members of the Government Labor and Elections Committee:

Good afternoon. My name is Charles Debnam, and I am testifying today on behalf of the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council in strong opposition to Senate Bill 623, the Maryland Premium Cigar Lounge Act of 2026.

AATCLC works to eliminate the unequal burden of tobacco-related disease in Black communities and to advance policies that protect all people from the harms of commercial tobacco. From that perspective, SB623 represents a significant step backward for public health, worker safety, and health equity.

First, this legislation weakens Maryland's clean indoor air protections by creating new exemptions that allow indoor cigar smoking in designated lounge settings. These protections exist for a reason to safeguard workers and the public from secondhand smoke exposure, which is known to cause serious cardiovascular and respiratory disease. Employees in cigar lounges should not be required to breathe toxic smoke as a condition of employment. No business model should depend on exposing workers to known health hazards.

Second, SB623 expands and normalizes environments that promote combustible tobacco use. Premium cigar lounges are designed for consumption. They encourage prolonged smoking, social reinforcement of tobacco use, and increased exposure to harmful emissions. At a time when Maryland continues to

invest in tobacco prevention and cessation, creating new venues centered on smoking sends a conflicting and harmful public health message.

Third, and critically, this bill raises serious health equity concerns. The tobacco industry has a long and well-documented history of targeting Black communities with aggressive marketing of tobacco products, particularly flavored and menthol products. As a result, Black Americans experience disproportionately high rates of tobacco-related disease and death. Policies that expand tobacco consumption environments especially those that combine smoking with alcohol service risk deepening disparities that public health leaders across the country are working to eliminate.

Fourth, SB623 creates regulatory inconsistency and undermines the integrity of public health law. Clean indoor air protections are most effective when they are clear, uniform, and consistently enforced. Carving out new exemptions for certain establishments creates confusion, weakens compliance, and erodes the public health foundation Maryland has built over decades.

Maryland has been a leader in protecting residents from secondhand smoke and advancing health equity. This bill moves in the opposite direction. Public health policy should reduce exposure to harmful products do not expand the places where they are consumed.

For these reasons, the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council respectfully urges the Committee to oppose Senate Bill 623 and maintain Maryland's commitment to clean air, worker protection, and health equity for all communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.

Charles Debnam
DC Representative
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