

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

**February 25, 2026**

Chair and Members of the Government, Labor, and Elections Committee:

Good afternoon. My name is Charles Debnam, and I serve as the District of Columbia Representative for the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council. I am testifying today in strong opposition to House Bill 766.

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.

HB766 would authorize the creation of premium cigar lounges connected to tobacco retail establishments, permit indoor cigar smoking in these venues, and create exemptions from Maryland's clean indoor air protections. While framed as a business or hospitality measure, this legislation would weaken public health safeguards, expose workers to harmful smoke, and risk worsening tobacco-related health disparities.

First, HB766 directly undermines Maryland's clean indoor air laws by allowing smoking in designated indoor cigar lounge environments. These protections were established to shield workers and the public from secondhand smoke exposure a known cause of heart disease, lung cancer, respiratory illness, and other serious health harms. Employees in cigar lounges would be required to work in environments filled with toxic smoke, simply to earn a living. No worker should have to choose between their health and their job.

Second, the bill expands environments designed specifically for tobacco consumption. Premium cigar lounges are not incidental spaces they are structured to encourage prolonged smoking, social use of combustible tobacco, and repeated exposure to harmful emissions. At a time when Maryland is investing in prevention and cessation efforts, HB766 moves policy in the opposite direction by formally establishing new indoor smoking venues.

Third, this legislation raises serious health equity concerns. Tobacco-related disease continues to disproportionately impact Black communities, in large part due to decades of targeted tobacco marketing and unequal exposure to tobacco products. Expanding smoking environments particularly those paired with alcohol service and social consumption risks reinforcing patterns of exposure and harm that public health leaders are actively working to reduce. Policies that expand access to tobacco use environments can deepen, rather than alleviate, long-standing health disparities.

Fourth, HB766 creates regulatory inconsistency and weakens the clarity of public health law. Maryland's clean indoor air protections are effective because they are broadly applied and clearly understood. Creating new carve-outs for certain tobacco-related businesses complicates enforcement, creates uneven standards across establishments, and erodes the integrity of protections that have successfully reduced secondhand smoke exposure statewide.

Maryland has made meaningful progress in protecting residents and workers from secondhand smoke. HB766 reverses that progress by introducing new exemptions and expanding indoor smoking. 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 House Bill 766 and uphold Maryland's commitment to clean air, worker safety, and health equity.

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

Charles Debnam

DC Rep.

African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council

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