

Testimony to the Public Health Committee, 3/4/19
Margaret Watt, Co-Director of The Hub: Behavioral Health Action Organization for Southwestern CT

In support of Raised H.B. 7200 AN ACT PROHIBITING THE SALE OF CIGARETTES, TOBACCO PRODUCTS, ELECTRONIC NICOTINE DELIVERY SYSTEMS AND VAPOR PRODUCTS TO PERSONS UNDER AGE TWENTY-ONE.

Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and respected members of the Public Health Committee:

I am the Co-Director of the Regional Behavioral Health Action Organization (RBHAO) for Southwestern CT, aka The Hub. The RBHAOs are a network created by DMHAS to support and coordinate prevention and related behavioral health efforts in all our municipalities. I am writing in strong support of raising the age statewide for the sale of all nicotine and smoking/vaping related products and devices.

All our towns currently see vaping as an epidemic among youth. The latest research shows that after a decades-long downward trend in smoking among youth, teens are now starting once again to smoke cigarettes, showing that vaping is indeed a gateway to cigarettes for many. But even for those who are not smoking cigarettes, vaping poses its own hazards. An estimated 83% of vapes contain nicotine (even when they say they don't). Vapes, like cigarettes, also contain a multitude of hazardous chemicals: cadmium, acetone, formaldehyde, and lead, among others. Additionally, teens are able to vape marijuana products. Those who start smoking or vaping during adolescence, when their bodies and brains are going through rapid development, are at risk of developing a lifelong habit that will adversely affect their health as well as burden the healthcare system.

Raising the legal age will support family and community efforts to delay smoking and vaping and will enable communities to penalize those who sell to minors. The raise bill includes language that will require retailers to purchase a license from the state, the costs of which will be used to pay for communities to check on and enforce that the law is being followed. The bill also covers penalties to those who sell to minors in terms of both temporarily revoking their license to sell and paying fees.

We need the strongest laws and penalties possible to counteract the purchasing power of Big Tobacco, which has been able to create this new market among teens to offset their decrease in market share. Setting both licensing and penalty fees even higher could have two benefits: discouraging many retailers from selling these unhealthy products at all, and/or providing funding for prevention work such as substance use education for teens, families, and school staff.

Thank you.