



**Testimony prepared and submitted by Geralyn Laut
Executive Board Member of Amplify, the Region 4 Behavioral Health Action Organization,
a membership group of the Connecticut Prevention Network**

In Support of SB 326

**An act prohibiting the sale of flavored cigarettes, tobacco products,
electronic nicotine delivery systems and vapor products**

Public Health Committee 2/8/21

My name is Geralyn Laut. I'm a resident of Glastonbury CT and I am a Board Member of Amplify one of the State's 5 Regional Behavioral Health Action Organizations. I am volunteering my time to testify today to urge your support of SB 326, which will ban the sale of all flavored tobacco products and electronic nicotine delivery devices here in CT.

The underlying reason I'm here is because in the US 480,000 deaths per year are attributed to tobacco use, with nearly 5,000 of them adults in CT. We as a country are shattered by the loss of the same number of lives due to Covid , but tobacco or as I see it, the tobacco industry has been killing close to the same number of people EVERY year for MANY years. The numbers have grown incrementally, not because people weren't dying due to tobacco, BUT because we didn't know the correlations from the beginning. Before me is a copy of the Surgeon General's report issued in 2014, entitled "The Health Consequences of Smoking ... 50 Years of Progress", and here's the supplemental evidence tables! Combined there are 1,537 pages. Needless to say there are LOTS of consequences. Regretfully the warnings this report sought to bring to light came 50 years after the first Surgeon General's Report on Tobacco in 1965, announcing the linkages of tobacco use to illness, disability and all too often death. I fear that we will be seeing a similar report about the health consequences of vaping, but I also fear that news will come too late for too many innocent victims.

PLEASE don't wait to deter youth and young adults from adopting a lifelong addiction to nicotine, a drug that alters brain chemistry to such a degree that the desire or should I say need is so intense that a homeless person might choose a cigarette over food, or elect to search for butts along the sidewalk or in a trash receptacle. I have seen nicotine continue to be an emotional crutch for a person facing a life threatening diagnosis such as COPD, emphysema or cardiac disease, or for a pregnant young woman despite being told of the risks to her unborn child. Remember, addiction drives a person to continue a harmful behavior despite the known consequences, regardless of the expense financially, socially or physically.

Dating back to 1983 when I first led a hospital based group program called SmokeWise, (developed by Merrill Dow Pharmaceuticals as an adjunct to Nicotine Gum, the first medically approved cessation aide) and later as a facilitator for the ALA's Freedom From Smoking Program , and more recently as a certified tobacco treatment specialist coordinating DPH funded programs in several municipal health departments here in CT, I've witnessed firsthand the powerful hold nicotine has on a person, starting as early as their first pack of cigarettes. The industry was wise to offer sample packs of 3 cigarettes at street fairs, sporting events and

concerts in the years before the prohibition of such predatory marketing practices. It doesn't take long for the brain to say I like that and in turn I NEED that, not to simply feel good, but to feel OK.

Dr. Nora Volkow, the head of NIDA, has described nicotine as the most addictive drug and in turn the most difficult drug to quit using. I've worked with many individuals in recovery from alcohol and or heroin, who were unable to quit smoking, many who died trying. Many of my successful ex-smokers, regretfully died after they quit. I like to think my efforts helped to lengthen their lives but was I was unable to reverse the many years worth of damage that occurred before their celebratory quit date. My own dad started at 13, quit at 65 and thankfully lived until 94 when admitted to the hospital with what was thought to be pneumonia; I was informed he had lung cancer. The evolution of that cancer began when he smoked his first cigarette as a young teen.

I recently watched the movie, Radium Girls I couldn't help but make comparisons to the corporate CEO's of American Radium, who early on had the research proving the harmful effects of radium exposure to the young girls hired to paint the numbers on watches, while witnessing the ill effects right before their eyes, yet chose to cover it up and deny the facts, in the name of corporate financial greed. Our advances in tobacco control, i.e policies to restrict second hand smoke, tax increases, and the proliferation of prevention and education campaigns finally allowed us to lower the rates of smoking and to diminish the rates of youth initiation. It is not surprising that the Industry has in turn embarked upon a modern technological approach to garnering new lifetime customers, luring them with false safety claims and altering the nicotine concentration to hasten dependence while also adding flavors to enhance the experience. Fruit punch, pina colada and peach may be new, but menthol was introduced for the same reason years ago, to diminish the harsh effects of burning tobacco on a person's throat and mouth actually numbing it to some degree as is the case with a cough drop or minty lozenge) and in turn making it more palatable to first time smokers, generally youth. Sadly research has proven that menthol smokers suffer from higher rates of lung cancer and other respiratory diseases . The industry of course knows that, but has fought hard to block attempts to ban menthol, knowing full well they will lose a large segment of smokers, mostly black American's who traditionally select menthol brands, and in turn pay a much higher price than the cumulative cost of 10 to \$12 per pack. My experience has also made it clear to me that urban youth, both black and Hispanic favor the skinny flavored cigars or cigarillos, often priced as low as 2 for \$1 (which reminds me, PLEASE seek to raise the tax on smokeless products and cigars to a rate comparable to cigarettes!)

If health and racial equity is your priority, and you want to prevent youth from making a choice today that I'm confident they will regret later, please vote to approve SB 326 and in turn, do everything in your power to encourage fellow legislators to do the same.

Thank you for your efforts in behalf of Connecticut residents , especially in these exceptionally challenging times.

Geralyn Laut

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