



August 23, 2019

The Honorable Melvin Carter and Members of the St. Paul City Council
15 Kellogg Blvd. West, 310 City Hall
Saint Paul, MN 55102

Dear Mayor Carter and Council Members:

I am the Chief Executive Officer of ClearWay Minnesota, an independent nonprofit organization that works to reduce tobacco's harm in our state. I am writing to urge you to support raising Saint Paul's tobacco age to 21 without penalizing youth.

Immediate action is needed to prevent nicotine addiction among youth. For the first time in 17 years, youth tobacco use has risen in Minnesota. The U.S. Surgeon General now calls youth nicotine addiction a national epidemic. The 2017 Minnesota Youth Tobacco Survey found that more than 26 percent of high-school students report using tobacco products, up 7 percent since 2014. This frightening trend is driven largely by a sharp rise in e-cigarette use. Nicotine – which is contained in nearly every e-cigarette – harms the adolescent brain and may prime young brains for addiction. Today's e-cigarettes can deliver very high levels of nicotine, but youth often don't know they contain nicotine at all.

Tobacco 21 prevents youth smoking by creating barriers to getting tobacco products from social sources. Most kids get cigarettes and tobacco products from older friends. Raising the tobacco sale age to 21 will help get tobacco products out of high schools, where there are plenty of 18-year-olds but few 21-year-olds.

As you continue to consider this ordinance, I urge you to remove penalties for underage purchase, use and possession of tobacco products (often called PUP). Increasing the tobacco sales age should not be about punishing our kids. Rather, it should be about protecting them from a lifetime of addiction. As you continue to discuss increasing the tobacco age in Saint Paul, please move forward with an ordinance that does not include PUP penalties for people under 21. These penalties have not been proven to reduce youth tobacco use and they open the door to selective enforcement against young persons of color.

There is broad consensus from national health organizations that Tobacco 21 policies should eliminate penalties on underage purchase, use and possession. Many of the state's communities that have raised the tobacco age to 21 considered expanding PUP penalties. After studying the evidence, hearing concerns from national groups like the American Cancer Society and listening to their constituents, they decided against it. Nearly all of Minnesota's Tobacco 21 communities have decided against expanding PUP penalties beyond state law, concluding that it was best for their community to support a responsible retail environment rather than penalize youth.

We all bear the costs of tobacco use, which is the leading cause of preventable death and disease in Minnesota. Tobacco costs our state an estimated \$7 billion in health and lost productivity and takes the lives of more than 6,300 Minnesota residents each year. Preventing youth from ever starting tobacco will help reduce this tremendous burden on our state. Eighteen-to-20-year-old customers account for approximately 2 percent of tobacco sales, but they provide tobacco products to the majority of underage tobacco users. Through Tobacco 21, this community can make a choice that puts the health benefit of saving kids from a lifetime of addiction and disease above a slight disruption to retailers.

Eighteen U.S. states and more than 475 municipalities across the country have already raised the age. Just like in the Freedom to Breathe movement, local governments can chart a path toward statewide action. To date, 40 Minnesota communities have passed Tobacco 21 policies, and the City of Saint Paul can join these leading localities to build momentum for state action.

Stopping youth smoking doesn't just prevent future disease and death, it also reduces excess medical costs, which are an enormous burden on individuals, families and taxpayers. I hope Saint Paul will remove youth PUP penalties and pass this life-saving policy. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "David J. Willoughby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a stylized "W".

David J. Willoughby, M.A.
Chief Executive Officer
ClearWay MinnesotaSM