

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota

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October 6, 2021

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

Dear Mayor Carter and Council Members:

I am writing to urge you to support the proposed ordinance that, among other things, sets a \$10 minimum price on cigarette packs and prohibits the redemption of coupons and in-store price promotions of all commercial tobacco products.

As the largest health plan in Minnesota, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is committed to improving the health of all Minnesotans, which is why we strongly support bold and local policy change such as this ordinance.

We know that price is the most effective tool for reducing commercial tobacco use in adults and preventing youth from starting. Tobacco companies use coupons and retail promotions to lower the price of products, making them much more appealing to youth and young adults. In 2018, tobacco companies spent \$9.1 billion to reduce the price of cigarettes and smokeless tobacco for consumers. That is more than \$1 million every hour.

We also strongly support the prohibition of menthol and flavored tobacco product sales in liquor stores. An epidemic of e-cigarette use has disrupted a downward trend in youth tobacco use overall. One out of every four Minnesota 11th-graders now report using e-cigarettes – a 54 percent increase since 2016. This policy will have a direct impact on reducing youth access to these products.

The tobacco industry, which includes e-cigarette manufacturers, uses menthol, candy and fruit-flavored tobacco products to attract the next generation of users. Their targets are undeniably young people, but because of predatory marketing, they also attract African Americans, American Indians and LGBTQ individuals. Nine out of ten African American adult smokers use menthol tobacco, compared to 22 percent of white adult smokers.

Phasing out commercial tobacco licenses will also reduce addiction and improve health. Increasing penalties for age-of-sale and sale of flavored product violations will also serve to hold irresponsible retailers accountable. We appreciate your comprehensive approach to addressing tobacco's harms.

In 2017, Blue Cross released a study showing that each year, smoking claims over 6,000 Minnesota lives and costs our state **\$7.5 billion** in health care costs and lost productivity. The staggering costs of tobacco in both health care costs and loss of life cannot be compared to the loss of profits for those who want to continue to sell these lethal products. Thank you for considering this life-saving policy package.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bukata Hayes".

Bukata Hayes
Vice President, Racial and Health Equity
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota
bluecrossmn.com