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February 17, 2021

Preventive Health Policy Division
Minnesota House
75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Chair Mike Freiberg and Members of the House Preventive Health Policy Division:

The Minnesota Council of Health Plans – the industry association representing Minnesota’s nonprofit health plans – strongly supports HF 904 and HF 569, two key pieces of legislation that prohibit and penalize the sale of flavored tobacco products, as well as fund the prevention and cessation of tobacco use.

Flavored tobacco products have long been at the center of the youth vaping epidemic, with 3.6 million American youth now using e-cigarettes. In Minnesota, 26% of 11th-graders reported using e-cigarettes in 2019 – a 54% increase since 2016 – underscoring the seriousness and increasing intensity of this epidemic throughout the state.

Flavored tobacco used in vaping is also compounding the impact of COVID-19 in underserved communities. The co-occurrence of vaping and COVID-19 are known to cause more severe disease in BIPOC communities, LGBTQ populations and those with mental illness, all of whom are already at increased risk of contracting and dying from the virus. The proposed legislation not only provides tobacco cessation funding for these communities, but also takes aim at the disproportionate level of marketing of these products to underserved populations.

The Council’s member health plans, which provide access to care for 4.7 million enrollees, support Minnesotans in their journey toward tobacco cessation. Health plans offer a variety of incentives to help enrollees quit tobacco use, as well as counseling throughout cessation programs for enrollees at no cost. The Council welcomes these legislative measures to protect Minnesotans, especially children and adolescents, from the harmful and long-term effects of tobacco products.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lucas Nesse", is written over a white rectangular background.

Lucas Nesse
President and CEO
Minnesota Council of Health Plans