

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota

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February 15, 2021

Rep. Mike Freiberg, Chair
Rep. Robert Bierman, Vice Chair
Rep. Glenn Gruenhagen
Rep. Patty Acomb
Rep. Esther Agbaje
Rep. Andrew Carlson

Rep. Mary Franson
Rep. Josh Heintzeman
Rep. Kelly Morrison
Rep. Laurie Pryor
Rep. Tina Liebling

RE: HF 904 (prohibiting the sale of flavored tobacco products)

Dear Chair Freiberg and Committee Members:

I am writing to urge you to support **HF 904**, which would prohibit the sale of all flavored tobacco products in Minnesota.

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 statewide policy change such as this bill.

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 smokers. Their targets are undeniably young people, but because of predatory marketing, they also attract Black people, American Indians and LGBTQ individuals. Nine out of ten Black adult smokers use menthol tobacco, compared to 29 percent of white adult smokers.

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.

Despite action from the FDA, the tobacco industry is still able to sell flavored and menthol products to youth and other communities. Minnesota deserves a strong policy that can protect consumers and reduce health care costs.

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I hope you will take this positive step toward making a smoke-free generation for all Minnesotans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Steffen', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Steffen, M.D., M.P.H.
Vice President, Chief Medical Officer
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota