



Washtenaw County Health Department

For Immediate Release

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Washtenaw County Board of Health Urges Preventing and Reducing Tobacco Use *Added flavors increase youth and adult addiction*

YPSILANTI, Mich., May 11, 2023 – Menthol and fruit or sweet flavors in tobacco products are creating new generations of tobacco users among teens and young adults. Menthol use continues to lead to higher rates of smoking-related sickness and death among African Americans and other minority communities. The Washtenaw County Health Department Board of Health is asking the Michigan Legislature to end the sale of flavored tobacco products as well as the laws that prevent local governments from setting their own limits on tobacco flavorings.

On April 28, the Board of Health passed a resolution advocating for “Ending the Sale of Flavored Tobacco Products, including Menthol Products, and Repealing Local Preemption of Tobacco Licensure and Sales Policies in the State of Michigan.”

“The negative impact of flavored products on new, young users as well as menthol among African American users is clear. We have an obligation to stop protecting tobacco industry profits and start prioritizing health,” confirms Justin D. Hodge, LMSW, chair and Washtenaw County District 5 Commissioner, liaison to the Washtenaw County Board of Health and clinical assistant professor with the University of Michigan School of Social Work.

“Reducing access to flavors without penalizing users is a critical step that will dramatically reduce tobacco-related illness and death,” says Hodge.

Scientific evidence established the disproportionate harms of flavorings years ago. Most community members support restrictions on flavorings; 77% of Washtenaw County residents support ending the sale of flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes. Yet sales and marketing have continued: “It has been more than a decade since the FDA’s Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee concluded that “Removal of menthol cigarettes from the marketplace would benefit public health in the United States,” especially among Black Americans. All other flavors are already prohibited in cigarettes” (Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, 2023).

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) proposed new rules limiting the use of menthol and other flavorings over a year ago. While there is hope for broad FDA action, the process is taking too long. In addition, manufacturers opposed to the regulations have falsely claimed the proposed rules will penalize individual users, creating confusion.

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Every day more new, young users try tobacco products with sweet, appealing flavors like strawberry, chocolate or banana. Many teens and young adults will find themselves quickly addicted and may struggle to stop. At the same time, African American community members suffer from higher rates of tobacco-related harms, including heart disease, cancer and stroke: “Research has found that menthol cigarettes were responsible for 378,000 premature deaths in the U.S. from 1980 to 2018. A staggering 41% of these premature deaths – 157,000 in total – were among Black Americans, who accounted for 12% of the U.S. population during this period” (Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, 2023).

“We have established evidence of the harmful effects of menthol and other flavorings in tobacco and industry efforts in promoting these products to people of color and youth,” says Chin Hwa (Gina) Dahlem, PhD, FNP-C, FAANP, chair of the Washtenaw County Board of Health and clinical associate professor at the University of Michigan School of Nursing.

“It’s time for policies to be in alignment to improve the health of our community,” continues Dahlem.

The Board of Health resolution will be sent directly to the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners, the Majority Leader of the Michigan Senate, the Speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives and appropriate Senate and House committee chairs.

Michigan and its local communities must act to change current trends and protect health. These actions can start locally and create positive change, starting now.

Resources/References

- Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids: [FDA Must Finalize Rules to Prohibit Menthol Cigarettes and Flavored Cigars Without Delay – They Will Have a Profound Impact on the Nation’s Health, Especially Among Black Americans](#)
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA): [FDA Proposes Rules Prohibiting Menthol Cigarettes and Flavored Cigars to Prevent Youth Initiation, Significantly Reduce Tobacco-Related Disease and Death](#)
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: [Better Tobacco Control Policy Starts Locally](#)
- Keep MI Kids Tobacco Free Alliance: [Learn the Facts](#)
- Washtenaw County Health Department: [Tobacco webpage](#)

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The Washtenaw County Health Department promotes health and works to prevent disease and injury in our community. Our mission is to assure, in partnership with the community, the conditions necessary for people to live healthy lives through prevention and protection programs.

Local public health information and updates are always available at www.washtenaw.org/health. The Health Department also provides frequent social media updates (@wcpubhealth) and sends regular email updates, sign up at <http://bit.ly/WCHD555>.