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October 3, 2019

The Honorable Karen Spilka
President of the State Senate
State House, Room 332
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Robert DeLeo
Speaker of the House of Representatives
State House, Room 356
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Madam President and Mr. Speaker:

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) represents approximately 80% of dentists in the Commonwealth through initiatives in education, advocacy, and promotion of the highest professional standards. As the leading authority on oral health care in the Commonwealth, we take great pride in championing oral health and lending the voice of dentistry to worthy initiatives that can make a difference in the lives of Bay State residents.

Reducing tobacco use is a priority issue for the MDS due to the oral health complications caused by smoking and tobacco products. In addition to heart disease, lung disease, and other health problems, tobacco use has been associated with serious oral health impacts, including oral cancer and gum disease.

The temporary e-cigarette ban announced by Governor Baker is a necessary pause while health officials investigate the recent spate of vaping-related illnesses. The logical next step is to enact a permanent fix to address the larger problem of youth tobacco use: ban the sale of *all* flavored tobacco products. While the governor's ban will temporarily protect youth from vaping, legislative action is needed to ensure that young people who have been exposed to flavored vape products don't turn to menthol cigarettes and other flavored tobacco products as a substitute.

The Massachusetts Dental Society supports the following legislation to address the flavored tobacco problem as a whole and stop the tobacco industry from using e-cigarettes to create a new generation of smokers:

- S. 2357 (Sen. Keenan) and H. 4089 (Rep. Gregoire) – *An Act Regulating Flavored Tobacco Products*, which would ban all flavored tobacco products, including e-cigarettes and other vape products, and
- S. 1606 (Sen. Chandler) and H. 2436 (Rep. Decker) – *An Act Protecting Youth from Nicotine Addiction*, which would institute an excise tax on vape products and increase the tax on cigarettes and cigars.

Banning flavored products is a key strategy in the fight to make sure that young people grow up without the burden of tobacco and nicotine addiction. Young people use flavored tobacco products at high rates. According to the 2017 Massachusetts Youth Health Survey, 80% of Massachusetts high school youth who are current tobacco users reported using a flavored tobacco product in the past 30 days. Mint, wintergreen, and menthol are popular flavors among young people, and they are one of the most popular e-cigarette flavors among youth.

Flavors undoubtedly make it easier for kids to start using tobacco products and e-cigarettes. They make the products seem harmless and familiar, while hiding the bad taste of tobacco. Menthol has the additional quality of soothing the irritation of combustible cigarettes, which is why so many young people start smoking using menthol cigarettes. The FDA's Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee found that youth smokers are

more likely to use menthol cigarettes than any other age group, with 54 percent of youth smokers ages 12-17 using menthol cigarettes, compared to less than one-third of smokers ages 35 and older. And, according to the FDA, it is “likely that menthol cigarettes pose a public health risk above that seen with nonmenthol cigarettes” due to their association with increased nicotine dependence and reduced success in smoking cessation.

According to a report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), almost a third of middle and high school students who used e-cigarettes in 2016 said the availability of flavors was a main reason they did. While smoking e-cigarettes may pose fewer health risks than smoking regular tobacco cigarettes—the leading cause of preventable death in the United States—it is by no means harmless. E-cigarettes still contain nicotine—the addictive drug in regular cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products—which increases the risk of high blood pressure and diabetes. The flavoring agents in e-cigarettes also may cause a chronic lung disease called bronchiolitis obliterans.

E-cigarettes also can have a significant impact on oral health. Scientists evaluated e-cigarette aerosols and found that they have similar properties to high-sucrose, gelatinous candies and acidic drinks. A study supported by the American Dental Association Foundation determined that vaping sweet e-cigarettes, including popular mint varieties, can increase the risk of dental cavities. Additionally, the nicotine in e-cigarettes reduces blood flow, restricting the supply of nutrients and oxygen to the soft tissues of the mouth. This can cause the gums to recede and exacerbate periodontal diseases. Reduced blood circulation also inhibits the mouth’s natural ability to fight against bacteria, which can accelerate infection, decay, and other problems. The Massachusetts Dental Society’s *Word of Mouth* publication includes more information on the dangers of e-cigarettes in the Winter/Spring 2019 cover story, “The Youth Vaping Epidemic.” I invite you to learn more at massdental.org/vaping.

In addition to banning flavors, taxing tobacco products is a proven strategy for reducing youth tobacco use. E-cigarette and other vape products currently have no excise tax, which is inconsistent with how cigarettes, cigars, and other traditional tobacco products are treated. S. 1606 and H. 2436 would address tobacco taxes comprehensively by taxing all tobacco products at rates that would discourage youth access. Specifically, the legislation would:

- Create an excise tax of 75% of wholesale on e-cigarettes and all vape products;
- Increase the tax on cigarettes by \$1.00 to \$4.51; and
- Increase the tax on cigars from 40% of wholesale to 80% of wholesale.

The statistics pointing to the benefits of protecting young people from tobacco are compelling:

- More than 90% of adult smokers started before they were 18 years old.
- At least 80% of youth smokers will become adult smokers, and half of adult smokers will die prematurely from tobacco-related diseases.
- Without prevention policies, 103,000 Massachusetts kids alive today will die from smoking.
- Tobacco and nicotine use costs Massachusetts more than \$4 billion annually in health care costs.

The MDS urges the legislature to pass these two pieces of legislation, which together would work to drastically reduce the appeal of vaping products to young people by making them flavorless and price prohibitive. This combined approach is the best strategy to end the youth vaping epidemic and protect Massachusetts youth—and all residents—from tobacco and nicotine addiction, and its detrimental impacts on oral and overall health.

Sincerely,

Dr. Janis B. Moriarty
President
Massachusetts Dental Society