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NEWS

Coalition to End Tobacco Targeting calls on city to end sale of flavored tobacco products

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Congresswoman Joyce Beatty joined the Coalition to End Tobacco Targeting Thursday to ask city government to pass legislation that would end the sale of menthol cigarettes and all flavored tobacco products in Columbus.

The coalition advocates for legislation that would ban flavored e-cigarettes and menthol products that have historically targeted the Black community, the coalition said.

"Growing up I can remember not only the Newport (menthol cigarettes) ... , but Salem, and Kool," said Beatty, D-Columbus. "They would do the Kool Jazz Festival that attracted many Black Americans."

Read more: Former Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman has personal reason to seek menthol cigarette ban

Menthol is a common cigarette flavor additive with a minty taste and aroma that reduces the irritation and harshness of smoking, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. This increases appeal, makes menthol cigarettes easier to use, and possibly enhances nicotine's addictive effects.

"We know this is targeting Black smokers," Columbus Urban League President and CEO Stephanie Hightower said at Thursday's news conference. "The tobacco industry chose us, Black people, to pedal their poison."

In 1950, fewer than 10% of Black smokers used menthol cigarettes, according to the 2021 report "Stopping Menthol, Saving Lives." Today, that number is at 85%. Each year, 45,000 Black Americans die from tobacco use, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

In addition to menthol cigarettes, the coalition is calling on the city to end the sale of flavored e-cigarettes and vaping products.

By adopting legislation to ban flavored tobacco products, the city would be taking a "huge step towards ending racism as a public health crisis," Christie Angel, president and CEO of YWCA Columbus, said.

The city of Columbus declared racism a public health crisis in June 2020.

Read more: What's been done to combat racism as a public health crisis in Columbus?

The Coalition to End Tobacco Targeting represents approximately 125 community groups, public health advocacy organizations and faith institutions. These include the Columbus Urban League, YWCA Columbus and PrimaryOne Health, an organization that connects patients with accessible healthcare resources and providers.

Supporters present at the news conference included former Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman; Rep. Dontavius Jarrells, D-Columbus; Columbus City Council President Pro Tempore Elizabeth Brown, along with local doctors, religious leaders and a crowd of children and teenagers.

Matthew McKoy, a recent graduate of South High School who is an intern at Columbus Public Health, spent the summer working with youth in the city and surveyed them on the use of flavored vapes.

"The solution from the last question I asked, 'What do you think we should do to prevent and stop our peers our age from doing vaping?' was to ban the flavors in vapes or simply banning vapes in general," McKoy said. "We asked them if vapes tasted like tobacco, would they still use them? And they said no."

While the coalition aims to address the tobacco industry's history of targeting the Black community, Beatty emphasized that when it comes to flavored e-cigarettes, "This isn't just about Black children. This is about all children."

Flavored e-cigarettes have led to an "epidemic" for youth, Hightower said, with half of high school kids trying the products and a third of them continuing to use them regularly.

"If flavored tobacco products are removed from our shelves, it will mean that these kids who haven't yet tried vaping or flavored cigars and menthol cigarettes are far less likely to do so," she said.

Beatty echoed that sentiment, saying that flavored tobacco products draw children to them in a way that's similar to candy.

"I remember growing up on bubble gum, and it was the flavor that got me," she said. "After the flavor was gone, you throw it away and get another one. So I equate (flavored e-cigarettes) to that."

During the news conference, Beatty addressed the crowd of students directly, a few of whom held signs reading "No menthol," "Flavor hooks kids" and "#BlackLivesBlackLungs," She urged them to tell their friends to help end tobacco targeting.

"Tell them no menthol, tell them Black lives matter," she said. "If you are bold enough to hold up those signs, then you need to be bold enough to remind them that flavors hook our kids."

Beatty, who is chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, said 70% of its 56 members signed a letter to President Joe Biden supporting similar, national legislation.

The next step, according to Charleta Tavares, CEO of PrimaryOne Health, is for Columbus City Council to adopt an ordinance banning the sale and distribution of all flavored tobacco products.

"This can start as a catalyst since we are the capital city," she said. "We can start a citizens initiative to have a ban of the sales of flavored products throughout the state of Ohio."

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