

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1570

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Chairman Headland and Members of the House Finance and Taxation Committee,

My name is Amy Heuer, I am a volunteer with the American Heart Association and the Bismarck Tobacco Free Coalition. I am Co-Executive Director of the ND Society of Health and Physical Educators and a recently retired Middle School Health and Physical Education Teacher. I am here as a representative from each of those organizations, as well as myself, to provide testimony and support for HB 1570. Thank you for providing this opportunity to provide testimony.

North Dakota's tobacco tax has not been raised since 1993, making it the second lowest in the nation. Looking back at what has happened in the past 32 years, I met and married my husband, raised 3 children, began my teaching career, teaching K-8 Health and Physical Education, retired, and a few months ago, celebrated my 30th wedding anniversary. It is crazy to think that I have lived all of that, and not once has the state raised its tobacco tax.

I mentioned that I am a retired teacher, spending the last 14 years of my career teaching 7th grade Health and PE. As the SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) advisor at my school, I spent a lot of time educating group members on the dangers of all nicotine delivery devices. They in turn educated classmates, holding education events throughout the school year. Very seldom did I need to explain the techniques these companies used to entice youth to use their product. It was obvious even to 7th and 8th grade students that they were being targeted, as few adults need to have a vape that looks like a highlighter, thumbdrive, sharpie, or watch, or to have candy and cereal flavors.

While we have seen the percentage of high school students using cigarettes drop in these 32 years, the use of vaping devices has been increasing, with the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey showing a high of 33.1% for those reportedly having used in the last 30 days. It currently sits at 18.2% in the 2023 YRBS. When we put all of the tobacco and nicotine delivery devices together however, those reporting use in the

last 30 days is at 19.6%. That is one in five teenagers using a nicotine delivery device in the last 30 days. We know that use of these devices is higher for those students living in poverty, and there is a direct correlation between higher tobacco use, low income level, and low number of years of education for adults.

When that number is compared to the percentage of ND high school students who felt sad or hopeless in the 2023 YRBS, 35%, we know we have a larger problem on our hands. Due to an initial feeling of euphoria when ingesting nicotine, many teens will “self medicate”, thinking they are helping themselves, when in reality they are negatively impacting brain development, and intensifying their anxiety symptoms and feelings of depression. This can cause them to increase consumption, causing a continuous cycle of addiction.

We have tools available to help combat this cycle. A study published in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine found that higher prices and taxes resulted in a reduction of youth current e-cigarette use and days using e-cigarettes. The U.S. Surgeon General has consistently emphasized that increasing the price of cigarettes is among the most powerful tools to prevent youth initiation and encourage cessation among current smokers . The American Journal of Public Health found that state-level tax increases are effective across diverse populations, reducing overall smoking rates regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, or racial background.

You will hear opposition talk about their business success in relation to this bill, with the number one argument being a loss of revenue. While I do not wish closing or bankruptcy on anyone, I do question the consideration of any business that supports a product that is so detrimental to the health of our citizens, especially our youth.

With this bill, you have the ability to support the youth and adults in our state by encouraging a reduction in nicotine use, while also improving access to mental and behavioral health access. It’s time to put the health and wellness of the citizens of North Dakota ahead of business interests.

Please vote DO PASS on HB 1570. Thank you, and I stand for questions.

References:

Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2019, 2023

American Journal of Preventative Medicine, June 2023

U.S. Surgeon General. (2014). The health consequences of smoking—50 years of progress.

American Journal of Public Health. (2020). Effects of state cigarette tax increases on youth smoking trends.