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Maine House of Representatives Leaves Kids Vulnerable to Flavored Tobacco Products

Kids expected to stand up to tobacco industry when their duly elected representatives cannot

AUGUSTA, ME – While Maine voters have said “yes” to ending the sale of flavored tobacco products, the Maine House of Representatives said “no” as session closed in the morning hours yesterday. Despite overwhelming support from Mainers in two separate polls over two years, the Maine House of Representatives never weighed in on LD 1215 – An Act To End The Sale Of Flavored Tobacco Products. The Maine Senate voted in favor of the bill last year.

“While it is incredibly disappointing that House Leadership let down Maine kids, this conversation is not over,” said Dan Cashman, spokesperson for Flavors Hook Kids Maine. “Literally tens of thousands of Mainers made their voices heard on this issue, and polling shows consistently that people in every corner of our state want this policy. Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to matter to the elected officials in leadership positions. This leaves more kids vulnerable to targeting by the tobacco industry, and we will inevitably see more kids become addicted with no action being taken. If adult members of the Maine House of Representatives cannot stand up to the tobacco industry, how can we expect our kids to do the same?”

Polling indicates nearly two-thirds of Mainers support the policy, crossing party lines, demographics, and geographic regions of Maine. Seven communities have taken their own action, passing local ordinances ending the sale of flavored tobacco products. Bangor, Bar Harbor, Brunswick, Falmouth, Hallowell, Portland and South Portland have all passed comprehensive ordinances, with no communities voting against this type of policy. In some of those communities, Councilors received stacks of postcards from constituents asking them to vote in favor of ending the sale of flavored tobacco products. About 10,000 similar postcards were delivered to members of the Maine Legislature earlier this year from constituents asking them to vote yes.

“Thousands of people across Maine sent a clear message to lawmakers this session--we’ve had enough of the tobacco industry targeting kids, people with lower income, African Americans, and the LGBTQ+ community with flavored products that perpetuate addiction,” said Rebecca Boulos, executive director of the Maine Public Health Association. “It’s incredibly disappointing that despite the overwhelming support from the public and many lawmakers, the House failed to move legislation forward that would end flavored tobacco sales. We’ll keep working to counter

the tobacco industry's relentless efforts to hook young people and communities under stress on these harmful products.”

The Flavors Hook Kids Maine coalition brought together individuals from nearly every sector in Maine to speak out about the dangers of flavored tobacco products.

“Whether it was kids, parents, school leaders, medical professionals, business leaders, or public health officials, Mainers support this policy,” said Allyson Perron-Drag, government relations director, senior regional lead for the American Heart Association. “There is endless data showing that flavored tobacco products are specifically targeted toward youth, and there are hundreds of stories from real Mainers that prove that it is a pervasive problem in Maine schools. This policy has been overwhelmingly supported by Maine people, and every single person that came to testify, write letters, or advocate in the halls of the state house deserved to have the Maine House of Representatives take up this issue. If House Leadership isn’t serving Maine people, who are they serving?”

In addition to public health experts, students spent significant time at the State House, telling lawmakers about their own experiences beyond the data.

“Please understand me when I say that flavored tobacco products have created a dire situation amongst my friends, in my school, and in schools all around the state,” said Noah D’Souza at a news conference in Augusta in January. D’Souza is a senior at Morse High School and president of his school’s National Honor Society. “We are crying out for help. We need our elected officials to step in and protect us from the massive budgets and direct targeting of our age group by big tobacco.”

“Maine kids deserve better,” said Rita Furlow, senior policy analyst for the Maine Children’s Alliance. “They are being targeted over and over again by the tobacco industry in order for that industry to protect their profits. The only way for them to protect their profits is to get our youth hooked on tobacco, and right now, they’re doing that through flavored tobacco. Our elected officials failed our kids by not standing up for them.”

While the Senate supported the bill, and there was vast support in the House, the bill was never taken up for consideration. This, despite the issue bringing together a diverse group of supporters that included environmental and business leaders.

“This issue is front and center for so many Mainers, including those of us who are greatly concerned about our environment,” said Beth Ahern with the Environmental Priorities Coalition (EPC). The EPC is made up of nearly 40 environmental, conservation and public health organizations representing more than 120,000 members who want to protect the good health, good jobs, and quality of life provided by the environment. The EPC endorsed the bill earlier this year. “This is an issue that has been enacted by individual communities, supported by thousands of Mainers focused on protecting our environment, and according to polling, it’s an

issue that nearly two-thirds of Maine voters consistently endorse. It is both baffling and disappointing that the House couldn't even bring it up for a discussion. An opportunity to pass good legislation was missed this session."

"With the Senate's approval, it is surprising and disappointing that the House didn't even bring this bill up for discussion," said Dana Connors, former president and CEO of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce. "Rarely have we seen a coalition like this one - bringing together groups that don't commonly work together on legislative issues. Businesses, kids, public health experts, environmental leaders, doctors, nurses, teachers, families, and others. Doing nothing comes at the expense of our youth's health - an expense not to be denied. I'm not sure why, but it was surprising and disappointing. I do know the essence of this bill represents a cause not to give up on, and it is worthy to be pursued in future legislative sessions."

"It is astonishing when a policy has this much support from Maine voters all around our state - all with the goal of protecting youth from being targeted by an industry that preys upon young people - that there wasn't a vote," said Cashman. "My heart goes out to the families who will have to deal with newfound addiction in the coming years when there was an opportunity to put a stop to it."

Dozens of partners have come together in support of the effort. The Environmental Priorities Coalition added its name to a long list of supporters earlier this year, including the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, Christian Civic League, Maine Children's Alliance, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, more than 100 Maine businesses, and a variety of local organizations. More details can be found at www.FlavorsHookKidsMaine.org.

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