FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Cleveland City Council has opportunity to address health inequities with introduction of ordinance to end the sale of flavored tobacco products that continue to target communities of color.

CLEVELAND, OH – February 6, 2023 – On Monday, February 6, with Cleveland’s smoking rate more than double the national average, Cleveland City Council introduced an ordinance to end the sale of all flavored tobacco products and establish a tobacco retail license. A coalition of more than 40 local and national health, faith, social justice, and community organizations cheered the introduction of the policy as a critical means of addressing racism as a public health issue and improving the health and quality of life for all Clevelanders.

For decades, the tobacco industry has targeted communities of color with flavored tobacco products. Products such as menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars were intentionally developed to mask the harsh taste of tobacco, allowing more frequent use, and resulting in higher addiction rates. The industry’s predatory behavior has had a devastating impact.

Black communities suffer the greatest burden of tobacco-related death, with black adults 32% more likely to die from heart disease and 45% more likely to die from stroke. Hispanic communities have also been subjected to increased marketing of menthol and other flavors.

“For too long we’ve only treated the results of tobacco addiction, and we’ve ignored the targeting that contributes to adverse health outcomes for communities of color,” said Dr. Charles Modlin, Medical Director of Equity, Inclusion & Diversity with the MetroHealth System and founder of the Minority Men’s Health Fair. “We need to look upstream. Ending the sale of flavored products including menthol and keeping tobacco out of the hands of youth is critically important. I applaud the City of Cleveland, City Council, and Mayor Bibb for taking this step to protect all Clevelanders.”

“The health and well-being of African Americans is directly tied to our work to stop the proliferation of poison in our neighborhoods. Our communities have been under siege for decades, inundated with messages by Big Tobacco,” stated Yvonka Hall, Executive Director of the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition. “The work of the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition addressing the historic targeting of the African American community by Big Tobacco makes the ending of the sale of mentholated cigarettes and other flavored products a matter of local priority and regional necessity.”

“The National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc. Greater Cleveland Chapter stands in support of the efforts to put policies in place to regulate menthol and flavored tobacco products in Cleveland,” commented Dionne E. Jones, President National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc. Greater Cleveland Chapter. “Our goal is to ensure that African American families have a stronger chance of living healthy and fulfilled lives. Having policies in place to reduce the use of harmful chemicals such as Menthol, ensures a healthier lifestyle can be a viable option.”
In addition to communities of color, the tobacco industry is now using the same tactic of flavors to target our children. Kid-friendly flavors like gummy bear, grape crush and cotton candy, often used in non-combustible “e-cigarettes”, are designed to hook a new generation of tobacco users. Nearly all youth e-cigarette users report using flavored products, and the overwhelming majority point to flavored products as their starting point.

“We've seen monumental declines in tobacco use among Cleveland youth since the passage of Tobacco21. But our data has also shown the within a year of implementing Tobacco21, nearly half of stores visited for a compliance check sold tobacco products to individuals under the age of 21,” said Dr. Erika Trapl, Associate Director of Community Outreach and Engagement at the Case Comprehensive Cancer Center. “Adoption of a Tobacco Retail License will provide the City of Cleveland with an avenue to enforce tobacco policies and ensure that our youth smoking rates do not rise again.”

“Tobacco use remains the leading preventable cause of death nationwide. Passing a local ordinance to end the sale of menthol cigarettes and all other flavored tobacco products can be a critical component to a comprehensive strategy to reduce tobacco use and prevent initiation and lifelong addiction. This ordinance will make it harder for the tobacco industry to target communities of color, the LGBTQ+ community, people with limited incomes, youth and young adults with enticing flavors,” stated Leo Almeida, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network Government Relations Director.

In addition to ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products, the legislation introduced on Monday would establish a tobacco retail license to better enforce local, state, and federal tobacco laws and ensure retailers are not selling tobacco products to underage purchasers. Taken together, the ordinance gives Cleveland the tools needed to lower the city’s startling high smoking rate, prevent future tobacco addiction, and reduce the health disparities that confront Cleveland’s black and brown communities as a result of decades of racial targeting.

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