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United States House Oversight and Reform Economic and Consumer Policy Subcommittee

“Don’t Vape: Examining the Outbreak of Lung Disease and CDC’s Urgent Warning Not to Use E-Cigarettes”

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Testimony of
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Chairman Krishnamoorthi, Ranking Member Cloud, and distinguished members of the subcommittee thank you for inviting me to discuss this very concerning situation where hundreds of people across the country, including 69 in Illinois, have experienced severe respiratory illness after vaping or using e-cigarettes. There are currently 13 additional residents from whom we are collecting more information. Unfortunately, one Illinois resident among these cases has died.

After learning from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services on July 31, 2019 of an Illinois resident experiencing severe respiratory symptoms possibly associated with vaping, the Illinois Department of Public Health launched an investigation, and issued a health alert on August 2, to local health departments, clinicians, and healthcare facilities with information about potential exposures, symptoms, and diagnosing, as well as a request that all instances be reported to IDPH. We also issued a news release that day to alert the public. Early in the investigation, IDPH requested assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), resulting in the deployment of CDC resources to Illinois to assist in evaluating medical case data.

In Illinois, case patients used numerous products prior to becoming ill so no one product, or combination of products, has been definitively linked to those cases. This challenge is exacerbated by case patients that are unable to talk with public health professionals because of the severity of their illness. Moreover, there is ongoing hesitancy among cases to sharing information about the products they have used, especially if the products were illicit. What we have found so far is case patients ranging in age between 15 and 42 years, with a median age of 22 years. The majority of cases are among males, reported from southern, central, and northern Illinois within rural and urban counties. While we have yet to clearly define the causative agent responsible for the lung injuries and death, what is clear, is that there is nothing healthy about vaping, with potentially heightened consequences for youths and young adults.

In addition to working with CDC, IDPH has partnered with other state public health agencies, Illinois' local health departments, the Illinois State Police and the Office of the Illinois Attorney General in searching for answers to the current outbreak of illnesses and containment of the growing vaping epidemic among our youth. The following are actions taken by IDPH since August 2nd, 2019:

- Meeting with middle and high school students to better understand the prevalence of, and the attraction to, vaping by young people,
- Conducting an anonymous, on-line survey to gather more data about vaping habits to help identify why some people are getting sick and others are not. This survey went live September 20 and has already received 2,600 responses from 99 of Illinois' 102 counties,
- Coordinating and sharing information with the Illinois State Board of Education to make sure youth are aware of the dangers of vaping and e-cigarette use,
- Issuing updates, guidance and recommendations to medical providers and clinicians across Illinois about symptoms, diagnostic and management tips, and to reinforce the importance of reporting cases,
- Convening a working group of medical and legal experts to study the scientific evidence to help uncover long-term solutions,
- Participating in national leadership task forces to guide investigative steps,
- Arming our Tobacco Quitline with all of the latest information, data, and resources about the dangers of vaping and smoking, including flavored products,
- Preparing to launch an aggressive social media campaign to make Illinoisans, especially young people, aware of the dangers of e-cigarettes and other smoking products and to promote use of our Quitline.

Despite these efforts Illinois continues to experience new cases of illnesses daily with no signs of slowing. More than 90% of cases have been hospitalized, with 72% being admitted to intensive care units, and nearly 30% have required mechanical ventilation to help them breathe.

Use of flavored products is on the rise. The 2019 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS) showed 68% of youth used flavored e-cigarette products, an increase from 61% in 2017. The 2017 Truth Initiative survey found 63% of teens and young adults did not understand that the JUUL products they used always contains nicotine. Teresa W. Wang, PhD. reported in the June 2018 Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report that E-cigarette use increased 900% amongst middle and high school students from 2011 to 2015. In December 2018, Vice Admiral Jerome Adams, the United States Surgeon General, discussed these alarming trends, noting research in 2018 that found more than 3.6 million youth used e-cigarettes.

Our focus groups seem to reflect that the numbers of young people vaping are growing and addiction is becoming a significant issue. Thus, there is a significant opportunity and need to permanently change the narrative around vaping and e-cigarettes. Since 2008, cigarette smoking

among Illinois high school seniors has decreased from 21% to 5%, in 2018. Yet, between 2016 and 2018, e-cigarette use in Illinois increased from 18.4% to 26.7% among high school seniors, a 45% increase; a 65% increase among 10th grade students; and a 15% increase was seen among 8th grade students. We cannot stand idly by and watch the high-tech e-cigarette erase the incredible progress of the last 10 years with enticements to vape by marketing to young people through flavors such as strawberry, watermelon, mango, and blue raspberry e-juices.

Ideas that have surfaced include bans of flavored nicotine products and the requirement, through regulations, to study vaping products for short and long-term health effects. Of critical importance is removing these harmful products from the grasp of our nation's youth. Contemporary product designs, attractive technology and associated items like vape wear appeal to our youth and serve only to enable use of these products by young people.

While the negative effects of vaping and related products are yet to be fully understood, what we are certain of, is that vaping, and e-cigarettes are unequivocally detrimental to the health and wellbeing of adolescents and anyone who has never smoked tobacco. Nicotine is highly addictive; more so for the youngest of vape users.

In the State of Illinois, Governor JB Pritzker supports moving forward in October's legislative session with strong and effective legislation to ban flavored vaping products, which are particularly targeted at young people. I urge Congress to take up similar initiatives to protect our youth from these products and support our message urging people not to vape until this national investigation has concluded and identified the products which are making people ill.

I wish to thank the Chair and the committee for this opportunity to share Illinois' perspective.