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Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Finance Committee, I'm pleased to have this opportunity today to provide my testimony representing the Clark County Combined Health District Tobacco Grant Program. My name is Leah Behler, I am a health educator for the past 3.5 years at the Clark County Combined Health District located in Springfield, Ohio. My role at the health department is coordinating a prevention grant which focuses on reducing the negative impact tobacco use has on the health and wellbeing of our community members in Clark County. I'm here today to provide insight into what issues we're dealing with at the local level regarding tobacco and how HB96 can assist with these issues.

Maintain Proposed Increased Funding for Tobacco Use Prevention Fund.

Tobacco related illness is the number one most preventable causes of death in the United States and is costly to the healthcare system to treat. It is a leading contributor of heart disease, stroke and cancer. Funds to increase education contribute to lower rates of tobacco chronic disease in adults while preventing new generations of tobacco users with youth. 9 out of 10 adults started using tobacco as teens. Individuals I speak to in the Clark County community have many misconceptions about the safety of electronic cigarette devices and their effects. There is also a knowledge deficit of resources for individuals who want to quit but are unsure how.

Maintain Proposed Increase to Ohio's Excise Tax on Cigarettes of \$1.50/pack

In my community the average cost of a pack of cigarettes is \$6.43. The lowest pack of cigarettes available is \$4.42. Placing an increase of \$1.50 per pack can spur motivation for individuals to choose to prioritize their health by quitting tobacco use. Young people are less likely to pay high prices for tobacco products which can discourage initial tobacco use. This initiative will help Public Health preventionists like myself encourage individuals who use tobacco to utilize cessation resources.

Maintain Tax Parity among Traditional Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products

In my community, the reality is, African American tobacco users are affected disproportionately than other groups. This initiative helps address low income and marginalized community members that I serve who use tobacco products. This will help decrease rates of tobacco related illness among our African American community members especially in the City of Springfield.

Maintain Proposed Vapor Retailer Licensing Program

In Clark County, we have 130 tobacco retailers. 87 alone are in the City of Springfield. To compare, we have 15 fitness centers, 22 grocery stores, 18 childcare centers and 3 urgent cares. Yet, we are saturated with access to the addictive substance of nicotine. Retailer density is extremely high as well as the proximity to youth-based organizations such as schools and youth centers. Our 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Clark County Combined Health District surveyed 3,824 high school students. It indicated 28% have tried an electronic vapor product and 13% have used a vape in the past 30 days. In discussions with youth, they indicated that on a scale of 1-10 it is a 12 in their ability to find a retailer willing to sell them tobacco products underage. In December 2022, we had a 35% compliance failure rate when checking 84 stores. In August of 2024, after fine enforcement, we improved to an 8% failure rate. This initiative will assist my work in youth tobacco use prevention by allowing frequent compliance checks and enforced retailer accountability.

Maintain Proposed Restriction on the Sale of Flavored Vapor Products

I am heavily involved with the youth of our community whether it is doing prevention education activities or giving presentations and demonstrations at school visits. I have had discussions with youth about flavored vapes. Youth feedback is consistently clear, they would not be interested in using an unflavored electronic cigarette. Nicotine is classically referred to as the “gateway drug” and for good reason. Individuals who fall into substance abuse later in life started with nicotine. In Clark County, 5.9% of high school students indicated they have used an electronic vape product 20 of the past 30 days. This initiative will dramatically result in lower rates of youth nicotine use and addiction.

I sincerely thank you for your time and for this opportunity to share information with the House Health Committee. I’m happy to provide further clarity with questions you may have.

Leah Behler
Tobacco Prevention & Cessation Health Planner,
Clark County Combined Health District

Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

The mission of the Clark County Combined Health District is to protect and improve the health of the community through the

- Promotion of Wellness
- Prevention of Injury
- Prevention of Disease