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Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on behalf of the Clark County Combined Health District Tobacco Grant Program. My name is Leah Behler, and I have been 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.

Fund the Tobacco Use Prevention Fund at Executive Budget Level – Appropriate \$10M/year in HB96

Tobacco-related illness is the number one most preventable cause of death in the United States and is costly to the healthcare system to treat. It is a leading contributor to heart disease, stroke, and cancer. These vital funds are essential to our goal of increasing education and contributing to lower rates of tobacco-related chronic disease in adults while preventing new generations of tobacco users among young people. The reality is, 9 out of 10 adults who use tobacco started as teenagers, underscoring the critical need for prevention efforts targeting youth. In Clark County, we see significant misconceptions about the safety of e-cigarettes and a lack of awareness regarding cessation resources.

Reinsert the Proposed Vapor Retailer Licensing Program – Section 3701.842 in HB96

In Clark County, we are alarmingly saturated with access to nicotine, with 130 tobacco retailers, 87 of which are located within the City of Springfield. To compare, we have 15 fitness centers, 22 grocery stores, 18 childcare centers, and 3 urgent cares. 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 and surveying 3,824 high school students, indicated that 28% have tried an electronic vapor product, and 13% have used a vape in the past 30 days. When surveyed, youth in Clark County indicated an overwhelming ease – rating it a '12' on a scale of 1 to 10 – in their ability to purchase tobacco products underage. In December 2022, initial compliance checks of 84 stores revealed a concerning 35% failure rate. However, following fine enforcement, a subsequent check in August 2024 showed a significant improvement 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.

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

Leah Behler
Tobacco Prevention & Cessation Health Planner,
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Prevent. Promote. Protect.