

March 15, 2018

Testimony in support of HB 2231

Chairman Johnson and Members of the House Taxation Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of HB2231. My name is Rebecca Garza. I live in the Rosedale Neighborhood of Kansas City, KS and am a volunteer with the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network.

I live in a community that I am proud of, but one that unfortunately endures unnecessary and inequitable suffering from early death and poor health. One of the major contributors to poor health outcomes in Wyandotte County and Kansas is the use of cigarettes and other tobacco products. Roughly 24% of the adult population in Wyandotte County is a current smoker. This is an incredibly urgent issue for our community since tobacco addiction has led to devastating consequences for families. **Our neighbors suffer from heart attacks, chronic diseases, cancer and one of the highest Fetal and Infant Mortality rates in the state all of which can be linked with high tobacco use.**

It is not a coincidence that communities like mine are suffering from disproportionately high smoking rates and death from tobacco. Wyandotte County is known for being the proud home to a diverse community with no racial or ethnic majority population and also unfortunately has more families living in poverty than the state average. We know from research across the nation and from tobacco industry documents themselves that minority and low income communities are specifically targeted by tobacco companies.

Consider for instance, the number of tobacco retailers in Wyandotte County versus Johnson County, - **WyCo has twice the number of tobacco retailers per capita than Johnson County and we also have more than twice the smoking rate.** This story of targeting of poor communities plays out all of over the nation to the point that we see in Kansas that 36.7% of people that make less than \$15,000 smoke compared to 10.8% of people that make more than \$50,000.

This has impacted me most recently with the loss of my step-mom who died in January, well before her 50th birthday from cancer. She had previously smoked menthol cigarettes, a product that is specifically marketed toward African American, Latino, and other minority populations.

This has to end, tobacco companies have said in internal documents that their target audiences are the lower income people who “have nothing to look forward to”. I am here to tell you that Wyandotte County residents are looking forward to a better future for our neighborhoods and want things to change. You have the opportunity to make this change using one of the most effective tools in tobacco control.

I am asking you to stand with our communities and increase the cigarette tax by \$1.50 per pack with parity for OTP, at 65% of the wholesale price. This one piece of policy would prevent 3,400 pregnancies from ever being affected by tobacco and save 9,000 people from dying early.

The evidence is clear that a *substantial* tax increase both encourages adults to quit while also preventing price-sensitive youth from ever becoming addicted. Another small tobacco tax increase will likely do nothing to reduce smoking rates because tobacco companies can absorb small price increases, using strategies like this coupon that was sent to my home. Plus, the tax on OTP, such as flavored cigars and smokeless tobacco, has not changed since 1972. Including OTP’s in this policy is critical since these products, particularly those that are flavored, are being used in our schools by teenagers. Even middle schoolers at my own neighborhood school, Rosedale Middle School, have told me that their friends are smoking cigarillos regularly, even in the bathrooms on campus. Wyandotte County and Kansas is ready for this to change.

I urge you to use at least \$5 million toward tobacco prevention and cessation which can provide medication and support services to help communities like mine recover from this addiction. This is just a drop in the bucket since tobacco companies spend roughly \$76.5 million to market their deadly products each year in this state but this would make a world of difference compared to the current state funding for this programming at less than \$900,000.

HB 2231 isn’t just a smart policy, but an absolutely necessary one that will save lives.

I urge the members of the Taxation Committee to support a substantial tax increase on cigarettes and Other Tobacco Product and dedicate \$5 million of the funds to support for cessation and prevention programming throughout the state. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to submit this testimony.