



TO: Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children & Families
FROM: Louella Amos, MD, Pediatric Pulmonologist, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Tuesday, December 16, 2025
RE: Support for SB 524 – Raising the legal age for sale, purchase and possession of cigarettes, nicotine, tobacco products, electronic vaping devices, etc.

Chair James and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share Children's Wisconsin's support for SB 524 today. My name is Dr. Louella Amos and I am a pediatric pulmonologist at Children's Wisconsin. We appreciate the bill's authors, Chair James, Senator Marklein and Representative Mursau, as well as the bipartisan cosponsors of this legislation, including Senator Wanggaard and Senator Johnson, for supporting this important issue.

As many of you know, Children's Wisconsin (Children's) is the state's only independent health care system dedicated solely to the health and well-being of kids. We offer a wide array of programs and services inside the walls of our hospitals and clinics and out in the communities we serve. At Children's, we strongly believe that e-cigarette, tobacco and nicotine product use is never appropriate, healthy or safe for kids and teens. My mantra is the only thing that should be inhaled into anyone's lungs is air.

Several years ago, the federal government passed a national law to raise the age to legally purchase tobacco, nicotine and e-cigarette products from age 18 to age 21. However, passage of a state-focused bill is still necessary. Stakeholders who receive their authority from Wisconsin law, including law enforcement and retail partners, need this legislation to ensure they can help keep these harmful products out of the hands of our young people and out of our schools. Strong, adequate compliance and enforcement is essential to limiting youth access to these products.

Let me share a couple reasons why we are concerned about youth use of tobacco products and e-cigarettes:

- Traditional tobacco and many e-cigarette products contain nicotine. This highly addictive drug has a negative impact on brain development, which continues until the mid-20s. The adolescent brain is exquisitely sensitive to nicotine, which can cause problems with learning and memory, as well as long-term behavioral impairments including depression, anxiety and mood disorders.
- Studies have shown that high exposure to nicotine in children makes them more susceptible to nicotine addiction and puts them at risk for lifelong addiction to tobacco products and other drugs. While there are resources available for youth to quit using traditional tobacco products, there are limited resources addressing youth e-cigarette cessation. Some may turn to using traditional tobacco products instead which also have significant health risks. As with most public health issues, prevention is critical.
- There is not sufficient data or research regarding both the short- and long-term health impacts of e-cigarette use among adults, let alone teens. We continue to learn about the effects of inhaling the aerosol produced by these products, which contains harmful chemicals, heavy metals and ultrafine particles. Importantly, these products are easy to use: vaping devices,

Pods/cartridges and disposable products come in appealing and pleasant flavors (even with the federal action targeting flavored products); they are easy to hide and have limited residual odor; they are less expensive than traditional tobacco products; and they don't require a lighter.

- Tobacco use and vaping can seriously damage health and affect breathing and participation in sports and other extracurricular activities. Tobacco use and vaping can cause anxiety and lead to issues at school including trouble concentrating, mood changes, and trouble with impulse control.
- Wisconsin 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey data indicates that one in three high school students (34%) have ever vaped. One in six students (15%) has vaped in the past 30 days compared to 6% of students who report using any tobacco products (cigarettes, cigars or cigarillos, or chew) in the last 30 days. Importantly, 22% of students who currently vape also smoke conventional cigarettes. This effectively represents a new generation of nicotine addicts and potential future traditional tobacco users. The percentage of those who tried to quit any tobacco products is 49%, which has continuously increased since 2017. These statistics are alarming and should concern parents, health care providers and policymakers.

As you may recall, Children's was on the forefront of a nationwide outbreak of severe lung injuries associated with vaping and use of e-cigarette products in 2019. These previously healthy teens experienced weeks to months of fatigue, GI complaints, weight loss and ultimately chest pain, shortness of breath and acute respiratory failure leading to their hospitalization. In addition to their physical health consequences, I had patients who lost sports scholarships due to their illness, jeopardizing their future educational and career goals.

Children's primary care doctors see firsthand the prevalence of tobacco, e-cigarette and nicotine product use and are very concerned about the severe risks these products pose to kids' health. As a physician, it's frustrating that after years of progress in decreasing teen tobacco use, we have witnessed an alarming increase in the use of the next generation of harmful products. Whether it's traditional tobacco, vaping or novel nicotine products, they do not belong in the hands of our youth.

We are all familiar with the harmful risks associated with tobacco use including various cancers, lung disease, heart disease, stroke and more. According to the Lung Association, in Wisconsin, approximately 7,850 people die each year from smoking-related causes with a direct health care cost of \$2.6 billion. And each year, teens begin the habit and risk becoming life-long tobacco users. We know that tobacco/nicotine habits start when you're young: 90% of adults who use tobacco started in their teen years. The younger a person starts using tobacco, the faster they become addicted and the harder it is for them to stop. Preventing use in the first place is critical to reducing the number of youth who smoke or use e-cigarette products. Children's has online lessons, activities and games to educate kids about how to prevent alcohol and other drug use, make smart choices, and much more. This includes lessons and materials specifically on vaping prevention.

80% of kids turn 18 while in high school; unfortunately, this makes it easy to supply these products to their younger friends and classmates. Raising the purchase age to 21 will make it more difficult for kids to access these products. Younger teens and middle schoolers are not as likely to be friends with 21-year-olds. Adults should be doing what we can to make these products unappealing and as hard as possible for our kids to get their hands on them.

Cross-sector cooperation is key in preventing e-cigarette possession among our young people. While a comprehensive strategy is needed to address youth tobacco and e-cigarette use, including making sure that there are addiction resources for teens and families, we believe that Tobacco 21 would be a strong step in the right direction. The ever-changing tobacco industry requires our consistent efforts to protect young people from these harmful products. We must do what we can to prevent kids from having easy access to these products and reduce their opportunities to try them in the first place.

Tobacco 21 is an important component of addressing this public health crisis among our youth and I encourage your support. Please contact me or Jodi Bloch with any questions you may have.

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