

Hello, my name is Ashley Hebert. I am Sr. Policy Manager of the Center for Black Health & Equity.

The well-being of Oregon's residents is directly linked to the state's prosperity. With this in mind, a new policy proposal aims to enhance public health across the state. The Center strongly urges you to support a comprehensive ban on the sale of menthol and all flavored tobacco products, including hookah, with no exemptions.

Hookah smoking, while rooted in Middle Eastern traditions, has seen a sharp rise in popularity across the United States, particularly among youth and young adults in the Black community. The tobacco used in hookahs is often infused with flavors and sweeteners, enhancing its appeal—especially to younger users.

Despite common misconceptions, hookah smoking is not a safer alternative to other forms of tobacco use. According to the CDC, it poses significant health risks to both users and those exposed to secondhand smoke. The flavored tobacco and smoothness of the smoke encourage deeper inhalation and prolonged smoking sessions—typically lasting 40 to 45 minutes, far exceeding the duration of cigarette smoking. This extended exposure dramatically increases the risk of severe health complications. One hour of hookah smoking is roughly equivalent to smoking 100 cigarettes.

For decades, the tobacco industry specifically marketed menthols to African American communities. The industry appropriated elements of Black culture and heavily invested advertising dollars into African American publications.

They are known for sponsoring Black events like the KOOL Jazz festival, saturating urban Black neighborhood stores with ads, and pricing menthols more cheaply in Black neighborhoods. As a result of their efforts, 85% of African American smokers choose menthols while less than 30% of white smokers prefer menthols.

Regardless of cultural origins of these products, tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable disease and death in the United States, contributing to a range of severe health conditions, including cancer, heart disease, and stroke. By eliminating access to flavored tobacco products, we can take an important step toward reducing tobacco use and improving public health outcomes for all residents.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to your support in advancing SB 702.