

Senator Encourages FDA, White House To Implement Menthol Cigarettes Ban

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In a speech on the Senate floor, Durbin calls out delays in implementing promised ban on menthol cigarettes, as Black communities continue to face disproportionate harm from Big Tobacco's marketing tactics

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) delivered a speech on the Senate floor calling on the Food and Drug Administration and Biden Administration to swiftly implement a proposed public health regulation to prohibit the production and sale of menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars. Durbin spoke about his own family's grief after losing his father to lung cancer, reiterating that a ban on menthol cigarettes could save hundreds of thousands of lives annually. In his remarks,

Durbin also emphasized that communities of color bear the brunt of the addiction, disease, and death from menthol cigarettes as Big Tobacco has intentionally targeted Black Americans in advertising and marketing.

“Last month, FDA submitted a regulation to the White House for final review. This proposed regulation would ban the sale of menthol cigarettes and prohibit the use of flavorings in cigars... When Congress banned the use of most flavors in tobacco in 2009, Big Tobacco secured a loophole for menthol. Why? Addiction is profitable,” Durbin began.

“For decades, menthol cigarettes, in particular, have been marketed aggressively to the African American community in the United States, through free samples, sponsorship of cultural events, and heavy advertising. As a result, today 85 percent of Black smokers use menthol cigarettes compared to 30 percent of White smokers. It's part of the reason why Black adults are 30 percent more likely to die from heart disease and 50 percent more likely to die from stroke compared to White Americans,” Durbin said.

Durbin went on to speak about his recent meeting with Illinois constituent, Martha Hike, who has lost six family members to lung cancer as a result of smoking.

“Right before Thanksgiving, I met in my office with Martha Hike, who lives in Chicago. She was in Washington because November is Lung Cancer Awareness Month. She shared the fact that lung cancer is the number one cause of cancer death in America, killing more Americans than breast cancer, prostate cancer, and colorectal cancer combined. She met with me because six of her dearest family members have died from lung cancer due to smoking,” Durbin said.

Durbin continued by sharing his own story of how Big Tobacco's greed and shamelessness has impacted his life. At 15, Durbin lost his father to lung cancer.

“I take this issue very personally. When I was a sophomore in high school, my father died of lung cancer. He was 53 years old. He spent 90 days, almost 100 days in the hospital before he died, and I was by his bedside regularly,” said Durbin. “It made a profound impact on me as a high school kid, and little did I know, I would be able to follow up on this issue when I came to the House of Representatives by passing legislation banning smoking on airplanes, and taking Big Tobacco on ever since.”

Durbin praised the Biden Administration for taking on major public health challenges, including cancer and gun violence. However, Durbin pushed the Biden Administration to implement the menthol ban.

“The Biden Administration has an incredible track record of taking on big challenges and delivering. It has launched the Cancer Moonshot, created a new federal research agency, ARPA-H, to accelerate cures for patients. President Biden has taken on the gun lobby and Big Pharma and secured big victories with the passage last year of the *Bipartisan Safer Communities Act* and the *Inflation Reduction Act*. Now is the time to do the same against Big Tobacco, which is responsible for nearly half a million deaths per year,” said Durbin.

“I urge the Biden Administration to look carefully at the proposal from FDA and swiftly finalize its rules on menthol and flavored cigars, which will save lives and reduce suffering primarily to communities of color,” Durbin concluded his speech.