

To: Members of the General Assembly of Maryland

Re: Veteran Support for Raising the Tobacco Sale Age to 21

Date:

We submit this letter to express our strong support for raising the tobacco legal sale age to 21 in Maryland.

Tobacco use remains this nation's number one preventable cause of premature death and disease, killing more than 480,000 Americans annually, including 7,500 in Maryland. As veterans of the U.S. military, we feel we have a unique perspective to share on tobacco use by soldiers. Tobacco use harms our soldiers, compromises our military's readiness and exacts an enormous financial toll. It is clear that there is no place in the military for tobacco.

A 2015 report by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), one of the most prestigious scientific authorities in the world, concluded that raising the tobacco age to 21 will have a substantial positive impact on public health and save lives. Raising the tobacco sale age to 21 will help prevent our soldiers from starting to use this deadly and addictive product in the first place or from continuing to use it. Given everything we know about what smoking does to the body and how it weakens our combat preparedness, it is unacceptable that soldiers smoke at higher rates than the general population and that more than 1 in 3 soldiers who are current smokers started smoking *after* joining the military.

Tobacco use is not a rite of passage or a sign of adulthood. Tobacco companies target young people before they can fully appreciate the consequences of becoming addicted to the nicotine in tobacco. Most smokers (95%) begin smoking before they turn 21. Once a person is addicted to nicotine, it is difficult to stop, and the health consequences begin immediately and accumulate over a lifetime.

The negative impact of tobacco on troop readiness and soldiers' health is substantial. Tobacco use reduces soldiers' physical fitness and endurance and is linked to higher rates of absenteeism and lost productivity. Service members who use tobacco are more likely to drop out of basic training, sustain injuries and have poor vision, all of which compromise troop readiness. Further, the money the DoD spends on tobacco-related medical care, increased hospitalization, and lost days of work - more than \$1.6 billion each year - is a waste of precious resources.

Our military leaders understand the toll tobacco takes on our troops and are actively taking steps to reduce tobacco use. We should support their efforts by adopting this policy. General Robert Magnus, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, put it succinctly in a statement for the military's cessation program, UCANQuit2: "[Tobacco] stands in the way of a Marine's number one priority: to be in top physical and mental shape - combat ready."

After Hawaii raised its tobacco sale age to 21, effective January 1, 2016, Hawaii's military bases decided to comply with the higher age in recognition of its benefits to readiness, health and

finances. Bill Doughty, spokesman for the Navy Region Hawaii, stated, "We see it as a fitness and readiness issue. When we can prevent sailors from smoking or using tobacco, if we can get them to quit, then that improves their fitness and readiness, and it saves them a ton of money too."

As is evident from the information presented above, it is critically important to support tobacco prevention efforts to protect the health of soldiers, to enhance military readiness, and to reduce military spending on tobacco-related medical care. We urge you to support raising the tobacco sale age to 21.

Sincerely,