

Opinion: Enact stronger tobacco policies to save Black lives

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Despite living in different cities throughout Michigan, all three of us are connected by a common purpose — the drive to create a healthier future for our children. We are all African American advocates leading community coalitions focused on advancing racial and health equity by ending the scourge of menthol-flavored cigarettes.

Our coalitions have done incredible work to educate Michigianians about how the tobacco industry has aggressively marketed menthols to Black communities for decades. Tobacco companies knew exactly what they were doing when they came into neighborhoods giving out free Newports and sponsoring cultural events and concerts like the Kool Jazz Festival.

Research shows that menthol makes smoking easier to start and harder to quit. No wonder African Americans smoke menthols at much higher rates and are more likely to die from smoking-related diseases than any other race.

In 2009, menthol cigarettes were allowed to stay on the shelves as federal legislation prohibited all other flavors. The Biden Administration could have corrected this mistake and issued a national rule prohibiting menthol cigarettes, but they recently pulled back after pressure from tobacco industry collaborators.

Like our colleagues at the NAACP, we are outraged because Black voters across the state and country want this change. In fact, a recent statewide public opinion poll showed that 68% of Black voters in Michigan supported ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products, including menthols.

While the White House is deliberating its next move, we are keeping our foot on the gas. This year, our state lawmakers will have the opportunity to enact a package of common-sense policies to help some Michigianians quit smoking and prevent others from starting by banning the sale of flavored cigarettes.

In addition to addressing flavors, Senate Bills 647-654 would tax e-cigarettes for the first time and require retailers to obtain a license to sell them, just like liquor stores. The policy change would also allow cities and counties to pass their own local restrictions.

We will continue to do our part to reverse this trend by sharing our stories, educating our peers and engaging our communities. We expect elected officials at all levels to do their part too. Together we can stand up to the tobacco industry and enact policies that will save Black lives, protect Michigan kids and create healthier communities for all of us to celebrate.

Minou Jones is the chair of the Detroit Wayne Oakland Tobacco-Free Coalition. Tia Ezell is affiliated with the West Michigan Health Equity Coalition and Dante Jennings is affiliated with the Genesee County Prevention Coalition.

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