

Stars, stripes and nicotine addiction

By Daniel Habib

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How can teenagers be responsible for serving our country yet not responsible enough to drink? The Virginia General Assembly sidestepped a hotly contested debate by exempting active military personnel from the recently implemented Code of Virginia Title 18.2 Section 371.2, which prohibits nicotine product purchase and possession under the age of 21.



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As a swing state in the heart of early tobacco country, Virginia may have been the last state on anyone's radar to make such a profound yet commonsensical statement as prioritizing its residents' health over a source of taxation. According to the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, 18- to 20-year old consumers only make up two to four percent of total cigarette consumption, so the upshot of a more limited market on state revenue is notably minimal.

Virginia's past and present circumstances are precisely what make the passing of this new legislation that much more potent. The drafting of regulatory laws, for the most part, keeps pace with Virginia's early start to the game. Infamous for early tobacco cultivation, Virginia is also home of some of its earliest regulations, ranging all the way back to 1730. Recently, Virginia representatives set a milestone by passing §18.2-371.2 and put pressure on other states' legislatures in a way that asks, "if we can do it, what's your excuse?"

Vaping is unlike most popular trends soon replaced by the next big thing; even if the entire American populace deemed vaping un-cool, those who fall victim to nicotine addiction would be forced to abide by the stipulation of its continued practice just to maintain a relatively steady state of mind. Tobacco consumers currently face this dilemma since the decline of tobacco popularization by mainstream media and effective targeting of big tobacco by the health industry.

For a quick buck, seniors exploit ill-informed, naïve underclassmen who perceive vaping as a leg up on the social ladder instead of an alternative to cigarettes. Truth Initiative reports 63% of Juul users aged 15-24 are unaware that "the product always contains nicotine." Some entertain the myth that vape juice is mostly water when 95% of the



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liquid concoction consists of glycerin and more viscous, thicker smoke-inducing propylene glycol, an ingredient in anti-freeze but controversially deemed safe as a food additive.

Worrisome fillers, such as tar, are indeed avoided with e-cig use. However, the relative ease of taking more hits on a vape under the radar without realizing exactly how much nicotine is concentrated in each hit can entail as or even more intense addiction with meager external pushback due to perceived inevitability of its practice.

Attempts to control nicotine abuse in high and even middle schools have fallen short because of inconspicuous locations, such as restrooms or simply outdoors. It would be unreasonable to encroach on the rights of

tended consequences of this monumental bill that must not be taken lightly. More so than adults, teens do not have the resources, counseling, or life experience to cope with the loss of their fix, which has gotten them through the stress of school, work, and problems at home.

A more effective approach may be comprised of more definitive research, state-wide addiction programs, and media attention on weening off what has almost replaced pen and paper as the staple of high school life.

Without a smooth grace period during which users can gradually chip away their nicotine dependence via more constructive outlets and progressively smaller provisions, §18.2-371.2 may invite illicit work-arounds. After all, minors are oftentimes supplied

by upperclassmen in high school. Who is to say that the same destructive power dynamic will not emerge on university campuses?

Although this legislation fares well in its idealized form to end the nicotine endemic in Virginia, the mental health of nicotine

addiction sufferers is inadequately addressed. The stepping stones are laid out for building a house of change; this legislation must not be passed in vain. A synergetic political and public health initiative to cure nicotine addiction should be built, piece by piece, on the progress of the 17 states, which have already passed legislation to raise the age of nicotine product purchase and possession.

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students, and traditional detectors, such as smoke alarms, are rarely triggered by vape products unless foreign particles are aimed directly into them. Instead of harsh crackdown, the health industry must convince vape abusers as they did tobacco consumers to make the voluntary, albeit arduous journey to recovery.

The implications of forcing teenagers to quit nicotine cold turkey constitute unin-