

Testimony in Support of HB 2306

Kaala Berry

Student and Volunteer, American Heart Association

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Kaala Berry. I'm a junior at Blue Valley North High School in Overland Park. I appear before you today as a volunteer for the American Heart Association.

It's no secret that the State of Kansas finds itself in a difficult time with the budget. From what I've read in the papers you don't have a lot of easy options to consider. Simply stated you can cut spending, increase revenue or a combination of both. Today I appear before you to address one option on the revenue side – the tobacco tax.

Because of my mom's work in the health care field I've long known the dangers of tobacco use. I've been an advocate for discouraging other teens from ever starting to use tobacco products, but I've also seen how easy it is for them to become addicted. Defiance of authority, looking cool or just wanting to fit in are all factors that draw my peers in and start them on the path to becoming a life-long smoker.

The numbers in Kansas are shocking:

- 3,000 kids become smokers each year in our state
- 10.2% of Kansas high school students smoke
- Kansas ranks 15th in youth who use smokeless tobacco products.

We can do better than this. One simple way is to increase the tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products.

The tobacco use prevention experts in the room will tell you that every 10% increase in the price of cigarettes will drive youth smoking down by 7%. A \$1.50 per pack increase is estimated to reduce youth smoking rates by more than 20%. I believe this is something everyone can support.

However, I don't consider myself to be an expert in tobacco use prevention. I'm merely a concerned high school student who does what I can to discourage my friends from starting to smoke or encouraging them to quit once they've begun.

While some may think that teens today have unlimited resources the truth is that this is just not true. For teen smokers, choosing between popcorn and a movie or dinner with friends at Chipotle has to be weighed against the cost of cigarettes. I can assure you that the smokers I'm around are VERY sensitive to the price. Raising the price of cigarettes makes the choice much easier. The Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids estimates that nearly 27,000 Kansas youth under the age of 18 will be kept from becoming an adult smoker if we raise the tax as proposed.

I can respect the fact that many of you haven't made up your minds on how to resolve the State's budget situation. With that said, let me remind you that raising the tobacco tax accomplishes two goals: it provides more revenue for the State of Kansas AND it is a proven strategy for reducing smoking rates – particularly among youth. I doubt your other options for raising revenue have the added benefit of

being a public health victory. In the long run, fewer smokers will save the State money through a healthier and more productive workforce, lower health care costs and produce reductions in costly chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke and cancer.

I encourage you to support the proposal to raise the tobacco tax.