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* Develop and institutionalize programs addressing the grave disparities in education, health, healthcare, and economic development faced by the African community.

* Defend the human and civil rights of African people.

Healthy Connections

NOVEMBER 2008

Loophole in Smoking Prevention Act Undermines African American Health

*Excerpt from The Journal-Constitution 06/05/08
By Louis W. Sullivan, Joseph Califano Jr, William S Robinson*

The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act awaiting action by Congress has the potential to advance tobacco control — but only if Congress corrects serious flaws that provide a major win for big tobacco and abandon African-Americans to choke in a thick cloud of menthol-flavored cigarette smoke.

The bill, which gives the Food and Drug Administration limited authority to regulate tobacco products, bans the use of all artificial or natural flavors in cigarettes — except menthol. **That's a huge loophole.** Menthol is by far the most popular "flavor" for cigarettes, and mentholated cigarettes are big business for tobacco companies, including a major proponent of the bill, Philip Morris USA.

This loophole especially undermines the health of African-Americans. **Nearly 75 percent of African-American smokers use menthol cigarettes.** An American Legacy Foundation survey found that **among teen smokers, 81 percent of African-Americans smoke menthol cigarettes compared with only 32 percent of whites and 45 percent of Hispanics.** And we know that 90 percent of adult smokers are hooked as teens.

Tobacco companies know one of the most effective ways to boost sales is to make cigarettes more palatable to first-time smokers, notably children and teens, by disguising the unpleasant taste of inhaled smoke and adding a fresh, minty flavor and cooling effect. They also know that menthol flavoring may make it more difficult for smokers to quit.

It is no secret that African-Americans have long been targeted by big tobacco marketing efforts with menthol cigarettes, a strategy that has proven disturbingly effective. In 1990, the launch of R.J. Reynolds' menthol-flavored Uptown

cigarettes in Philadelphia was planned to coincide with the celebration of Black History Month. With strong opposition from the public health profession, the U.S. Sec. of Health and the African-American community, R.J. Reynolds backpedaled and withdrew Uptown from the market.

But today R.J. Reynolds is test-marketing a new product called Camel Crush, a "menthol-on-demand" cigarette where the smoker can bite down or crush the menthol capsule in the filter to give them anywhere from a small burst to an extreme rush of menthol flavor — the perfect mask for tobacco's harsh flavor and a cynical ploy to entice young smokers. The tag for the marketing push will be "Squeeze. Click. Change."

Smoking-related diseases are a leading cause of death for black Americans: Each year more than 47,000 die from smoking-related cancers, strokes, heart diseases and respiratory ailments like emphysema. Thousands more are crippled by these diseases. **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that more black women get lung cancer than breast cancer and black men are 50 percent more likely to get lung cancer than white men.**

Banning flavored cigarettes which mask the harshness of tobacco — something that can deter some first-time smokers, especially children — is a positive move. But by failing to ban menthol, the bill caves to the financial interests of tobacco companies and blatantly discriminates against African-Americans.

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