



Preserving Hookah Culture & Protecting Hookah Tradition across the USA

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Testimony of Christopher Hudgins  
Board Member, National Hookah Community Association

Joint Legislative Budget Committee on Health  
February 28, 2023

Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the views of the National Hookah Community Association (NHCA). My name is Chris Hudgins and I represent my company, Al Fakher, on the board of NHCA.

Founded in 2019, the National Hookah Community Association brings together, and serves as the voice of, hookah producers, distributors, sellers, hookah lounge owners, consumers, and community members who support the preservation of hookah's cultural traditions. As you consider Governor Hochul's budget proposal to ban flavored tobacco products, it is important to respect the cultural significance of hookah to our minority and immigrant populations. Additionally, federal data shows that youth access to and use of hookah is very low.

Hookah, also known as shisha, is a combination of tobacco and a sugar substance, such as honey or molasses. Hookah is only comprised of approximately 15-20% tobacco. Hookah is a heavy, wet sticky substance that can only be smoked in a hookah pipe. As has been the practice for hundreds of years, hookah is, by nature, a flavored product. As a result, **a ban on flavored tobacco also would result in the ban of ALL hookah.**

We ask that you exempt hookah from this flavor ban. You would be joining numerous jurisdictions that have done the same. In December of last year, California took a historic step by enacting a statewide ban on flavored tobacco products, which exempted hookah. The sponsors of that legislation recognized hookah's cultural significance and its low usage rate by youth. During the consideration of this measure, the California legislature recognized the uniqueness of hookah and sought to include proper protections for this important cultural practice. As Governor Gavin Newsome said at the time, "hookah is not the problem in classrooms." Many other state and local governments including Colorado, Columbus, OH, Denver, San Diego, San Jose, Los Angeles, and others, have included exemptions for hookah in recent flavor ban legislation.

Hookah is a very small category in the tobacco space, making up only roughly 0.005% of nicotine product sales in the U.S. However, hookah is a very important cultural practice that has existed for centuries, originating in the Middle East and India. Today, a broad cross-section of immigrants in the U.S. from around the world enjoy hookah both at home and in lounges as a centerpiece for cultural, business, and social gatherings. Hookah is widely used by Middle Eastern, Armenian, Turkish, East African, Indian, Persian, Indonesian, and other minority immigrant citizens. Hookah lounges across the country have come to serve as safe gathering places for many diverse ethnic and religious communities. Despite the importance of this social practice and tradition, NHCA members continue to find that many policymakers are often unfamiliar with hookah, its practice, and its community.

Given the large population of immigrants from countries that practice hookah, it is no surprise that New York has many hookah smokers and hookah lounges across the state. While large concentrations of hookah lounges can be found in the New York City area, lounges are found in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Binghamton, Albany and even up to Watertown.



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Each one of these lounges represents an independently owned small business. The vast majority are owned by an immigrant or first-generation American with ties to regions where hookah originated and is practiced. A ban on all flavored tobacco would ban all hookah and would close these businesses which preserve a familiar custom from home for many.

NHCA fully supports efforts to eliminate youth access and usage of tobacco products, including hookah. As has been well-documented, hookah is unlikely to be used or consumed by youth. There are many reasons. Hookah water pipes are conspicuous and several feet tall. They are not easily concealed and are cumbersome to setup.



Hookah is also not cheap. The cost of purchasing, securing, and preparing the components to smoke hookah is significant. Using a hookah is also a lengthy process which involves separately lighting a heat source (usually coals made from coconut husk), mixing the hookah tobacco, placing it in the bowl for the device, covering the bowl with foil and poking holes, filling the basin with water, and then placing the now warmed up coals on the foil. This process takes 20-30 minutes. It is important to note that unlike other forms of tobacco, the heat source does not actually come in contact with, or ignite/combust, the hookah tobacco. Once properly set up, the heat from the coals is used to produce an aerosol that flows through the pipe. As such, the characteristics of what is inhaled are much different than any other combustible tobacco product.

Hookah is also not sold in convenience stores. You can only find hookah in ethnic markets, specialty tobacco stores or lounges that are restricted to of-age customers, preventing easy access. NHCA and its members stand firmly behind efforts to prevent anyone who is not an adult over the age of twenty-one from obtaining hookah products.

For all these reasons, hookah remains unappealing to youth and is unlikely to be smoked by them. Federal data confirms this point. Annual studies by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) report recent usage of various forms of tobacco by middle and high school students. The most recent edition of this report, released in November 2022, showed that just 1% of middle and high school students used hookah in the past 30 days, ten times less than the number of teens who vape.<sup>i</sup> When assessing the appeal of flavored tobacco products to youth, the FDA has also stated regarding hookah that “data do not appear to raise comparably urgent public health concerns [to vape], as the lower prevalence of youth use of these products suggests that they do not appear to be as appealing to youth at this time.”<sup>ii</sup>



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A ban on hookah would not only eliminate this important cultural practice for many U.S. citizens, but could also shutter many small, independent, and minority owned businesses. Many of these businesses serve as community gathering places for immigrant populations in cities across the country. Many hookah users are part of religious or ethnic populations that already face discrimination. Eliminating this cultural practice would make many feel as though they are misunderstood and targeted as an outsider by lawmakers and regulators.

We ask that you do not target this important cultural practice and shutter minority and immigrant owned businesses. Please exempt hookah from any flavored tobacco ban legislation.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7145a1.htm?s\\_cid=mm7145a1\\_w&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7145a1.htm?s_cid=mm7145a1_w&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.fda.gov/media/133880/download>