

# Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service



June 7, 2019

The Hon. Tim Kaine  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Sen. Kaine:

I am a constituent of yours (Alexandria, VA, residence) and Executive Director of a non-profit, non-partisan organization that represents the uniformed officers in the US Public Health Service. I saw in a recent *Army Times* story that you are sponsoring a bill to raise the tobacco-use age to twenty-one, with no exemption for military servicemembers. We applaud your efforts.

The Defense Department has stated that 175,000 currently serving servicemembers will die of tobacco use. To put that number into context, that's more soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines than were killed in combat in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the war with Mexico, the war with Spain, the First World War, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan combined.

The sad part of this is that 38 percent of current military smokers began smoking after they joined the military—which almost all of the enlisted personnel did before they turned 21 years old. Perhaps you know it already, but all of the military services prohibit tobacco use while recruits are going through basic training. Even if they were smokers and tobacco users before joining the military, they have to quit cold turkey when they are in their recruit phase. Unfortunately, as soon as these young men and women finish their basic training and go on to advanced specialty training, they are free to resume tobacco use—and most of them do so. We could stop that.

If the legal tobacco use age were raised to 21, almost all of those who enlist in the military would not be able to smoke legally for their first few years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 95 percent of smokers start by age 21. Raising the legal age of tobacco use to 21 would cause a significant reduction in its use.

Why does the Defense Department care about tobacco use among servicemembers? After all, most of these premature deaths will occur after these folks have left the military. They then become the VA's problem as they suffer from emphysema and lung cancer and all the other ailments that smoking causes.

For one thing, smoking-related illnesses cost the DoD some \$1.6 billion per year in direct outlays. Second, smoking is a readiness issue. Smokers are not as fit and capable as non-smokers. They spend more time in the hospital when they are wounded or injured, meaning they are away from their units

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longer.

But, I know it's not simple. There is a military culture which encourages tobacco use. "Willie and Joe" from World War II exemplify it. The war-weary GI gazes with the thousand-yard stare, cigarette dangling from his lips. Today's GI is likely to dip or chew or smoke, all of which can lead to really bad health results.

I remember when boxes of c-rations came with three-packs of cigarettes in them, together with matches. This was the tobacco companies' way of hooking more military folks on tobacco use. They actually started doing this during WW I at a time when men smoked cigars, and cigarettes were not regarded as manly. It was all nefarious, as we know from the tobacco company documents that have been released over the years. Members of the military services were a particular target for these companies.

This is all very personal with me. My dad started smoking after he joined the National Guard in 1939 at age 19. I asked him why he started, and he told me that all the guys smoked, so he started smoking. He was a tuba player in the division band, but he saw that war was raging in Europe, and when his unit was federalized—that is, taken onto active duty—in 1940, he decided that he didn't want to go through the war as a tuba player. He decided to become a pilot, and after much training, he learned to fly the B-17 bomber. He was shot down in 1944 on his 19th mission, a raid against the oil fields and refineries at Ploesti, Romania. He parachuted out of his damaged aircraft, was taken prisoner, and eventually was freed from prison camp. During his life he and my mom worked their way up to three packs of cigarettes per day. Even packs of cigarettes were not enough. I remember that they bought their Chesterfields in oval tins that held a hundred or 200 cigarettes.

My dad died of a heart attack at age 56, and I resent his early death. My son never knew his grandfather, and I resent that. The NAZIs couldn't kill him, but tobacco did. My dad is one of those statistics I spoke of in the beginning of my testimony. I ask you today to spare other families the pain of losing a loved one to a premature death, as my family did. I appeal to you today to do the right thing for the men and women who serve our country in uniform and help them go smoke-free.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Col. James T. Currie, USA (ret.)  
Executive Director