



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

July 15, 2014

The Hon. Barbara Mikulski
Chair, Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Richard Shelby
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Mikulski and Ranking Member Shelby:

I am writing this letter to express our support for the provision in the Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2015 Appropriations Bill that eliminates the five percent discount for tobacco and tobacco-related products sold at military exchanges. We believe that this would have a beneficial effect on tobacco use in the military, especially by reducing its use among young people who start using tobacco after they join the service.

Fifty years ago this year U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry released his "Report on Smoking and Health," and tobacco use—especially smoking—was at a much higher level than it is today. Civilian smoking levels are at approximately 18% today, a decrease from the 42% prevailing at the time of Surgeon General Terry's report. One place where smoking levels have not decreased, however, is the U.S. military, where the usage rates remain stubbornly high. Just as disturbingly, between 36% and 40% of military smokers (the exact percentage depends upon the branch of service) pick up the tobacco habit after they join the military. Scientific studies have found that young people are especially susceptible to price when deciding whether to smoke and how much to smoke. A 10% increase in cigarette prices has been shown to cause a 14% drop in usage.

Despite a Defense Department directive which requires that tobacco products be sold at no more than a 5% discount below lowest civilian retail prices, nationwide surveys have shown that exchanges and commissaries (which sell their tobacco products on consignment from the exchanges) sell cigarettes at considerably greater than the 5% allowable discount. A study in the May 2013 issue of *Military Medicine*, for example, found that cigarette discounts were as much as 73% below outside retail prices, with the average discount on Marlboro Reds to be 25.4%.

Smoking kills. If trends hold, some 175,000 members of today's military will eventually die of smoking-caused diseases. Wounded smokers recover slower than do non-smokers and have double the risk of post-surgical infection when compared with non-smokers. Smoking costs the Defense Department and the Veterans Affairs Department billions of dollars a year. It is time to end the tobacco discount in military exchanges and commissaries. Our servicemembers deserve nothing less.

Respectfully,

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

Cc: The Hon. Richard Durbin, Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense
The Hon. Thad Cochran, Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense