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Guest Commentary: Vaping may worsen effects of COVID-19, yet vape shops want to be open as “essential service”



Jose Luis Magana, AFP via Getty Images

Demonstrator vapes during a rally outside of the White House to protest the proposed vaping flavor ban in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 9, 2019.

By **SPECIAL TO THE DENVER POST**

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By Jodi Radke

Guest Commentary

Depending on your preference you can call it hubris,chutzpah, recklessness or disregard for the health of Denver's residents. It definitely takes a good supply of all of these for Denver vape shops to petition Mayor Michael Hancock to remain open during the COVID-19 shutdown, claiming they are essential businesses providing health benefits. This despite the fact that respected public health experts cite vaping as a potential factor in worsening the effect of the deadly COVID-19 coronavirus.

That is on top of the fact that Colorado and the nation are struggling to reverse skyrocketing youth use of e-cigarettes and the recent conclusion by the U.S. Surgeon General that "there is presently inadequate evidence to conclude that e-cigarettes, in general, increase smoking cessation." It is highly irresponsible to argue that e-cigarettes should be considered essential when they could well put users at greater risk for serious complications from COVID-19, they are addicting our kids, and they have not been shown to help smokers quit.

As families, businesses and communities struggle daily with the devastating effects of the pandemic, it has been heartening to see political leaders heed the pleas of physicians and public health professionals about how to flatten the infection curve. This means shutting the doors of businesses with some exceptions specifically permitted by the mayor.

With COVID-19 occupying our resources, our hearts and our minds, it has never been more important to protect our lungs. The coronavirus attacks the lungs, and behaviors that weaken the lungs, including vaping, put individuals at greater risk. There is conclusive evidence that smoking increases the risk for respiratory infections, weakens the immune system and is a major cause of a number of chronic health conditions, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease and diabetes. There is growing evidence that vaping, likewise, harms lung health. Use of these products put users directly in harm's way, and at greater risk when confronted with the harms of coronavirus.

Just listen to the experts.

Dr. Nora Volkow, Director of the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse, recently noted, "Because it attacks the lungs, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 could be an especially serious threat to those who smoke tobacco or marijuana or who vape."

And the federal Food and Drug Administration, which regulates products such as e-cigarettes, has publicly stated that vaping may leave users with underlying health conditions at an even “increased risk of serious complications” if they contract the respiratory disease caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus. An FDA spokesman said that this “includes people who smoke and/or vape tobacco or nicotine-containing products.”

In their appeal to Mayor Hancock, vape shop retailers argue about “real health implications.” But make no mistake. The real health implications relate to the use of these products. There has never been a more critical time for individuals to protect their health by avoiding the use of all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, and for elected officials to enact policies, like removing flavored tobacco products from the market, which will keep kids from ever starting their use.

After drastically reducing youth use of tobacco – primarily old-fashioned combustible cigarettes – the emergence of e-cigarettes threatens to reverse these decades of progress. Nationally, over one-quarter of high school students use e-cigarettes today; Colorado rates are among the highest of the states.

That’s why there is a debate occurring across America about the spread of vaping, particularly among teens and young adults. Many health care professionals in our area and across the country are sounding the alarm about the damage resulting from the vaping culture. Yet wherever one stands on this issue, surely we can all agree that Denver vape shops aren’t “essential services.” Bravo to Mayor Hancock for recognizing – and enforcing – basic common sense.

Jodi Radke is regional director for Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

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