

TESTIMONY SUPPORT FUNDING FOR SB2024

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Chairman Pollert and Members of the House Appropriations, Human Resources Committee. I'm Alison Harrington, a respiratory therapist. On average I counsel 5-15 tobacco users a day. I always ask them at what age did they start using tobacco, the most common answer is between 13-15 years old. The youngest age I've heard is as young as 5 years old. The younger they are when they start using tobacco, the more addicted they are and the harder it is for them to quit.

I counsel tobacco users of all ages who want to quit for many different reasons but most commonly it is for their health, their family, they've experienced a life threatening event, they've been diagnosed with a chronic disease or lung cancer, or they are pregnant.

As a respiratory therapist I see what smoking does to the lungs at all age levels, from the young children who are exposed to 2nd and 3rd hand smoke that have asthma, to the adults who have been diagnosed with lung cancer or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).

This addiction is like no other, it cannot be quit very easily despite what many think. As part of my profession, I help pregnant women through nicotine addiction counseling. In North Dakota nearly 14% of pregnant women are hooked on nicotine. This is a serious health situation and addiction is real and nearly impossible for some people to quit. This is why we need to fund prevention – we know that 90 percent of our youth start smoking by their 18th birthday. If we can prevent this, we are close to solving the problem of tobacco addiction.

Tobacco kills 1,000 North Dakotans each year and costs us \$326 million in health care each year. If we want to reduce health care costs, we must address the leading cause of preventable death and disease – tobacco use. If we can prevent children from ever starting we can cut down on the cost of healthcare treatment. This good work must be kept at BreatheND. They know how to get the job done. It's about prevention. We need to start our focus on the End Game and reduce tobacco use to the low single digits, and the way we do this is to prevent our children from ever starting. We need to make the world a better place for them. They are our future.