



African American
Leadership Forum

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NEWS RELEASE

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Minneapolis, MN 55443

Community partnership takes on menthol tobacco use among local African Americans

A recent survey found that Twin Cities African Americans believe menthol tobacco is a serious threat to their health, that the tobacco industry has heavily targeted them with menthol tobacco marketing, and that they support new laws to reduce tobacco's harm in their community.

A new grassroots health initiative aims to change this and to encourage members of the community to come up with community driven solutions.

"Menthol-flavored cigarettes are a concern to us because they can mask the harshness of cigarette smoke and mislead people into thinking they are not as harmful," said Gene Nichols of the African American Leadership Forum (AALF) in Minneapolis and project manager of this innovative initiative. "We're very concerned about menthol making it easier for youth to start smoking, and harder for anyone to quit."

The first step was to gather the voice of the community to understand the extent of the issue. AALF conducted a baseline survey in mid-2016 among 407 U.S.-born African Americans in Hennepin and Ramsey counties; to measure community knowledge and awareness about the harms of menthol-flavored cigarettes – at church gatherings and community meetings and through door-to-door canvassing in predominantly African American neighborhoods. Results were further validated through interviews with respected leaders from the faith-based, community organizing, business and philanthropic sectors.

"We're connecting with leaders across all sectors of our community – the folks already working to find solutions that improve the lives of their community members," said Nichols, who also serves as co-chair of AALF's Health and Wellness Group. "This key informant process is fully engaging community members to assure alignment of the menthol issue in their community and to help identify change agents who now can educate the community about menthol."

Key survey highlights:

- 88 percent of all respondents said tobacco use remains a significant health issue in their community.
- 86 percent of respondents supported more laws to reduce the harm of smoking.
- 61 percent of respondents agreed menthol cigarettes are marketed to African Americans more than other racial groups.

Of all surveyed smokers (24 percent of respondents):

- Smokers were attracted to menthol products because they taste and feel different than other types of cigarettes.
- 84 percent indicated they use menthol-flavored products.
- 69 percent agreed that menthol's cooling sensation makes it easier for young people to start.
- 83 percent get their cigarettes at gas stations or convenience stores – locations commonly visited on a day-to-day basis.
- 57 percent noticed coupons for cigarettes in the past 30 days.

“We’ve gained valuable insight into the perceptions of menthol tobacco among the African American community,” said Nichols. “This effort lays the groundwork for what lies ahead. It will serve as a basis for community engagement and education in the second phase of the grant.”

The second phase, also led by AALF, is expected to include a number of educational sessions in the participating cities and counties to raise awareness and engage the local African American community in identifying solutions.

The project is supported by a Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) grant required by the Minnesota Legislature¹ to address African American menthol tobacco use. The AALF is partnering with the local health departments of Hennepin County, Saint Paul-Ramsey County, Minneapolis, Bloomington, Edina and Richfield.

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ⁱ Surveys completed in Bloomington, Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Edina, Minneapolis, Richfield, and St. Paul

¹ Statewide Health Improvement Partnership: Menthol Cigarette Intervention Grant
<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/oshii/ship/menthol.html>