Mississippi Public Health Association
LEGISLATIVE AGENDA 2020

The Mississippi Public Health Association (MPHA) Board of Directors through the legislative and policy committee developed and approved eight legislative agenda items for the 2020 Mississippi Legislative Regular Session. Any additional public health issues of interest to MPHA that are introduced during the session will be addressed by the MPHA Board of Directors.

**MPHA’s legislative priorities include the following:**

1. Funding essential health services by increasing taxes on state-sold tobacco products;
2. Implementing a comprehensive policy on vaping using electronic nicotine delivery devices in Mississippi;
3. Ensuring affordable, quality public health insurance programs to women of reproductive age;
4. Prohibiting the use of tanning facilities by minors (children under 18);
5. Protecting immunization requirements for the children of Mississippi;
6. Supporting legislation-strengthening protections for school age athletes at risk of sports-related concussions;
7. Ensuring access to health insurance in Mississippi; and
8. Supporting a tax break on groceries.

**Additional Policy Position Statement:**

1. Ensuring healthy food selections on restaurant menus.
**Fund essential health services by increasing taxes on state-sold tobacco products**

MPHA, with more than 65 other Mississippi health organizations, supports a $1.50 per pack tax increase on cigarettes to generate approximately $153 million in new revenue and reduce Medicaid expenditures.

**Background:**

Tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of disease, disability, and death in the United States. In Mississippi, smoking costs an estimated $1.23 billion in direct health care costs, including $319 million in tobacco-related disease costs covered by Medicaid.

**Why it matters:**

Not only can the proposed tax increase prevent over 11,000 smoking-related deaths and stop as many as 16,400 children from becoming adult smokers in Mississippi, but the estimated $153 million generated will support essential public health services statewide. MPHA also supports raising state tax rates for other tobacco products to parallel the increase in the cigarette tax rate.

**Why MPHA supports this initiative:**

Increasing taxes on state-sold tobacco products is a reasonable and cost-effective public health policy that will save lives and money as well as provide much needed resources for our public health system.
Implement a comprehensive policy on vaping using electronic nicotine delivery devices in Mississippi

MPHA supports a comprehensive policy that includes placing vaping devices in the same category as tobacco, establishing parity or uniformity in taxation with tobacco with revenue going to support public health programs, raising the age limit to 21, and regulating internet sales.

Background:

A 2018 Youth Tobacco Survey in Mississippi revealed a vaping prevalence rate of 21.6% among youth in the state. A recent advisory by the U.S. Surgeon General noted that e-cigarette use by teens has skyrocketed in the past year. Little to no protections are in place to safeguard the public’s health through regulation of vaping devices, nicotine content in vaping products, and sales.

Why it matters:

Urgency is required due to numerous vaping-related deaths across the country, including Mississippi, as vaping becomes more prevalent. Immediate efforts to protect children and youth from the use of e-cigarettes, a lifetime of nicotine addiction, and associated health risks should be addressed through evidence-based strategies.

MPHA joins the American Public Health Association and other health organizations in monitoring and supporting efforts to address the use of electronic nicotine delivery devices and the associated health risks for all consumers.

Why MPHA supports this initiative:

Implementing comprehensive electronic nicotine delivery and vaping policies in Mississippi will provide some regulation and deterrent to this unregulated practice. Resources gained from additional taxation can be used to gather data and to support educational interventions. Overall, the public’s health will be better protected and can result in saving lives and prohibiting addiction.
Ensure affordable, and high-quality public health insurance programs to women of reproductive age

MPHA supports the expansion of Medicaid coverage for women of reproductive age.

Background:
Preterm birth is the leading cause of infant mortality and morbidity and is also associated with other severe social and economic consequences, and its prevalence is higher in the US than in other developed nations. Survival rates for African American mothers and their infants are even bleaker. African American women across the economic spectrum are dying from preventable pregnancy-related complications at three to four times the rate of non-Hispanic white women, and the death rate for black infants is twice that of infants born to non-Hispanic white mothers.

Why it matters:
About 17% of babies in Mississippi are born preterm. Compared to a national average of about 12%, this puts the state among the top five in the rate of premature births each year. The problem is even greater for minorities, particularly African-American women, where rates can be greater than 20% — one child in five. Greater than 60% of births in Mississippi are paid for by Medicaid.

Why MPHA supports this initiative:
In some states and among specific racial and ethnic groups, policy changes have brought about improvements. MPHA recommends the following policy actions to address disparities in maternal and infant health outcomes:

*Increase access to health insurance programs to women before pregnancy.* Research shows one of the best opportunities to achieve healthy pregnancies is to improve the health of all women before they become pregnant. Medicaid expansion to cover individuals up to 138% of the federal poverty level can play an essential role in improving maternal and infant health. A growing number of studies indicate that Medicaid expansion has reduced the rate of women of childbearing age who are uninsured, improved health outcomes and helped to reduce racial health disparities, including lower rates of premature birth and low birthweight for African-American infants in expansion states.

*Increase access to comprehensive healthcare coverage for post-partum women to 12 months.* Medicaid maternity coverage ends 60 days after giving birth, ending access to care at a time when risks of maternal complications and death persist.
Prohibit the use of tanning facilities by minors (children under 18)

MPHA supports legislation that prohibits the use of commercial tanning facilities by children under 18 years of age.

Background:

Seventeen states and one territory have already enacted laws to ban the use of tanning facilities by minors. Mississippi currently requires parental consent for minors to use tanning facilities but has not yet enacted legislation to prohibit their use of commercial tanning facilities altogether.

Studies consistently show that indoor tanning increases a person’s risk of getting skin cancers, including melanoma. Preventing minors’ exposure to indoor tanning will reduce their risk of developing life-threatening skin cancers in their most productive adult years.

During the 2019 session, a Senate bill with 12 co-sponsors, passed out of the Senate Public Health and Welfare committee unanimously and out of the full Senate with a vote of 34-17. Unfortunately, the bill died in the House Committee.

Why it matters:

Cancer is a leading cause of death for Mississippians. Research shows the use of tanning facilities before the age of 35 significantly increases the risk of developing deadly skin cancers, including melanomas. Indoor tanning also increases the risk of potentially blinding eye diseases, if proper eye protection is not used.

Why MPHA supports this initiative:

MPHA and the MSDH Board of Health support prohibiting the use of tanning facilities by minors. Already, members of the Mississippi Senate and other legislators support this public health initiative and have expressed interest in enacting legislation on this vital issue.
Protect immunization requirements for the children of Mississippi

MPHA opposes any policy changes that allow philosophical exemptions for childhood immunizations.

Background:
Mississippi ranks 1st nationwide for the rate of children immunized and its low incidence of vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks. Immunizations against many childhood diseases are currently required by law for children to enter Mississippi schools and childcare centers, although state physicians may grant limited exemptions for medical reasons.

The state’s longstanding immunization requirement for school entry was upheld by the state Supreme Court in 1979. In 2015, the Mississippi Senate passed a resolution to recognize public and private healthcare providers statewide for achieving the highest kindergarten vaccination rates in the United States.

A variety of studies on vaccine safety recently examined the adverse events associated with childhood immunizations. These events are extremely rare, and the absolute risk is low.

Research has confirmed a relationship between the ease of obtaining an immunization exemption and the increase of a community’s disease risk. Communities with low immunization rates have experienced a resurgence of vaccine-preventable diseases.

Why it matters:
Incomplete immunization coverage increases the risk of disease for everyone, including those who have been immunized and those who cannot be immunized for medical reasons. Research demonstrates the benefits of immunizations far outweigh any risk.

Why MPHA supports this initiative:
Laws protecting childhood immunizations help families stay active, healthy, and productive, as well as protect the public’s health.
Support legislation strengthening protections for school-age athletes at risk of sports-related concussions

MPHA supports legislation that increases protections for all young athletes at risk of sports-related concussions.

Background:

Sports-related injuries are one of the most common causes of concussion in children and young adults. Outcomes associated with concussion are cognitive and behavioral issues that can be disruptive to a child’s life and ability to learn. Long-term impacts of concussions have been linked with slower recovery, persistent cognitive impairment, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, and chronic neuropsychiatric symptoms such as depression.

In the US, an estimated 1.6-3.8 million sports-related concussions occur annually, accounting for 5-9% of all sports-related injuries. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, sports-related concussions affected about 2.25 million high school students in 2017.

In Mississippi between 2015 and 2018, 4,900 concussions were diagnosed in a clinical setting for children ages four to 19, although the true number of concussions is likely higher but underreported. As of 2015, approximately 113,000 children and young adults were participating in high school athletics in Mississippi.

Why it matters:

Mississippi law currently does not cover: protections for children in kindergarten through 7th grade; requirements for reporting of incidences of concussions; return to play guidelines; non-school based organized sports; appropriate equipment for sports where concussion is a risk; guidelines for return of students to the learning environment; or athletic trainer availability.

Why MPHA supports this initiative:

MPHA joins the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in recognizing sports-related concussions as a significant public health issue that can be addressed through evidence-based policy.
Ensure access to health insurance in Mississippi

MPHA supports legislation that ensures access to affordable health insurance coverage in Mississippi.

Background:

Approximately 1 out of 7 Mississippians lacks any health insurance coverage. This is one of the top uninsured rates nationwide.

Residents without health insurance are typically younger, low-wage workers who do not have access to employer-sponsored coverage, do not qualify for public coverage, or are not eligible for the state Medicaid health insurance program due to eligibility limitations. Healthcare access is an important factor in preventing disease and disability, detecting and treating illnesses, increasing quality of life, reducing the likelihood of premature death and increasing life expectancy.

Why it matters:

Residents who lack health insurance coverage face delays in receiving healthcare services, particularly healthcare services that support the maintenance of good health. This places economic hardships on families without coverage who require medical care.

Lack of insurance coverage jeopardizes the fiscal stability of hospitals, particularly in rural areas, where higher numbers of uninsured residents live. Hospital closures due to fiscal instability can limit access to and increase the economic burden of health care on all Mississippi taxpayers.

Why MPHA supports this initiative:

Laws enabling Mississippians to gain and keep health insurance coverage allows access to health services that improve residents’ health and stabilizes payment mechanisms for health service organizations to sustain the provision of healthcare services.
Support a tax break on groceries

MPHA supports legislation that minimizes financial barriers to healthy food for Mississippians.

Background:

Mississippi is one of just three states that taxes sales of food. Eating is necessary for survival, yet satisfying this basic human need takes a bigger bite out of the household budgets of low-income families than wealthier ones. This is especially true in Mississippi, where one in five Mississippians and one in four children statewide lack adequate access to safe and nutritious food — the highest hunger rate in the U.S.

Why it matters:

In 2017, the current 7% sales tax on groceries cost the average Mississippi household an $604. With less to spend on groceries, low-income Mississippians cannot afford fresh and nutritious food options. Instead, they are forced to turn to low-cost and unhealthy alternatives that contribute to high rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and infant mortality.

Mississippi’s tax on food may impact the state’s economy. Several studies suggest that grocery taxes can drive cost-conscious shoppers across state lines to purchase food. Each of Mississippi’s neighboring states tax grocery sales at lower rates or not at all: Louisiana exempts groceries from its state sales tax, Arkansas taxes groceries at less than 1%, Alabama and Tennessee tax groceries at 4%. Mississippi’s regressive grocery tax policy also may significantly impact grocers, food retailers, farmers, and their employees providing fresh food to Mississippi’s 33 border counties.

Why MPHA supports this initiative:

Mississippians overwhelmingly support grocery tax reform, as indicated in a 2019 Millsaps College/Chism Strategies poll that found 69% of voters believe Mississippi should change how groceries are taxed in the state.
**Additional Policy Position Statement:**

While we do not anticipate a legislative item at this time, the MPHA Board voted to include this important public health issue given the need to combat obesity as well as the need to increase access to healthful food.

**Ensure healthy food selections on restaurant menus**

**MPHA supports legislation that will increase access to healthful food options for Mississippians.**

**Background:**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than half of all Americans live with a preventable chronic disease, and many such diseases are related to obesity, poor nutrition and physical inactivity. Mississippi has the second highest rate of adult obesity in the nation at 37.3%.

**Why it matters:**

Adult obesity in Mississippi has increased dramatically in the last 30 years (up from just 15% in 1990) and is expected to continue to increase significantly over the next two decades. Per capita, medical cost for individuals with obesity is $2,741 higher than those of normal weight. Partnerships and collaboration are crucial to building capacity and leveraging resources towards prevention and control of obesity in Mississippi. Experts at the CDC not only encourage collaboration but have made it a key strategy in many funding opportunity announcements.

**Why MPHA supports this initiative:**

In light of Mississippi’s high rate of adult obesity as well as related disease and cost burdens, MPHA supports legislative policy initiatives that leverage collaborative energies to effect systems-level change to combat the obesity epidemic.