April 27, 2017

Honorable Corey Johnson
Chair, Health Committee
New York City Council
City Hall
New York, New York 10007

Dear Mr. Johnson:

My name is Michael Weitzman and it is a great honor for me to testify before you today. I congratulate our City Council and Department of Health and Mental Health for their continued efforts to protect the public from a profound public health threat. I believe that the upcoming bill to be discussed today regarding waterpipes (hookahs) is a needed next step in the regulation of hookah use in New York City that I support wholeheartedly.

I am a pediatrician by training who is a professor of Pediatrics, Environmental Medicine and Global Public Health at New York University. I have more than 40 years of caring for and training thousands of others to care for children, adolescents and young adults; conducting research; and consulting to a large number of city, county, state and federal agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, the Environmental Protection Agency, and most recently the Federal Food and Drug Administration on the effects of environmental contaminants such as lead and tobacco smoke on health. For the past 5 years my work has largely focused on water pipes, also known as hookahs. These studies have clearly indicated markedly dangerous levels of multiple chemicals in the air of hookah bars that cause cancer and heart disease, among other illnesses. They also have shown that hookah bar workers have evidence of widespread reactions, called “inflammatory” reactions, that indicate that the entire bodies of these individuals are adversely affected by
smoke generated by hookah smoke, even though they are not smoking hookahs themselves. We also have found that hookah smoke in homes permeate the entire home, far more than does smoking cigarettes, thereby endangering the health of non-smokers in those homes. Others have found that one hookah session, usually 45 minutes to one hour, results in exposures to toxic agents equal to 5 packs of cigarettes. The epidemic of use of these agents is increasing at epidemic rates, posing a profound public health threat to New York City’s (and the world’s youth).

I fully support adding non-tobacco hookah smoking to the Smoke Free Air Act. In addition to nicotine, smoked vegetative matter contains over 6,000 chemicals, more than 60 of which have been found to cause 17 different cancers, and more chemical constituents and more cancers are likely to be identified. There is little about tobacco (combustible vegetative materials with nicotine) that makes it more dangerous to health than non-tobacco containing products that are smoked.

Prohibiting individuals under the age of 21 to enter establishments where hookahs are used is a markedly logical and needed regulation. More than 98% of cigarette smokers in the US begin to smoke before age 18. To the extent that hookah smoking may lead to cigarette addiction, it is imperative that we regulate young people’s exposure to and use of agents that may lead them to use cigarettes.

Hookahs have been found to be terribly unsanitary, and as such very effective vehicles for transmitting truly terrible infectious diseases, including, but not restricted to Tuberculosis. I thus fully endorse your strengthening regulations aimed at keeping hookahs germ free.

Work that Drs. Gordon, Sherman and I have done clearly shows that hookah smoke in homes is far more dangerous to children and others than is smoking cigarettes in homes. I applaud and support the portions of the proposal that impose stringent ventilation and Air Quality /Flow Standards that non-tobacco smoking establishments have to follow. This is a truly important part of the proposed legislation.
By virtue of the proposed legislation New York City remains at the forefront of public efforts to prevent our children and population as a whole from the most pernicious and ubiquitous exposures. I applaud and support this proposal wholeheartedly and without reservation.

Respectfully,

Michael Weitzman MD
Professor of Pediatrics and Environmental Medicine, New York University School of Medicine
Professor of Global Public Health, New York University