
By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 3, 2020

2020 has gotten off to a rough start for both vaping supporters and critics. A new policy by the Trump Administration has both sides angry, and a new anti-nicotine policy by U-Haul, the self-moving company, appears to be blatantly discriminatory.

On the issue of vaping, it is quite easy to make either advocates or critics angry. What is difficult is to anger both simultaneously. Yet, the Trump Administration has found a way to do just that.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the administration wanted to take some sort of action on vaping. Because of his brother's unsuccessful battle with alcoholism, President Trump is a teetotaler. Obviously, his family was deeply affected by addiction, and he wants to protect other families from it.

However, the issue of vaping is extremely tricky. On the one hand, e-cigarettes are an excellent public health tool in the fight against smoking. There are hospitals in the UK with vape shops because that country's healthcare system would rather have vapers than smokers. There's also the issue of freedom of choice: If adults can smoke pot, then why shouldn't they be allowed to vape?

On the other hand, teenagers think e-cigarettes are cool, and many are willingly getting addicted to
nicotine. Though e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful than cigarettes [3], they aren't entirely safe. It's in the best interest of public health to restrict access (and to make e-cigarettes less appealing) to minors. The question is how to strike that balance.

The Trump administration initially wanted to ban most e-cigarette flavors, but then backed away. As reported in the Wall Street Journal [4], the new ban applies to vaping devices that use disposable cartridges rather than refillable tanks. The former are more popular with teens, while the latter with adults.

Under normal circumstances, this might appear to be a good compromise. If the policy fails to sufficiently curb teen vaping, then tighter policies can be implemented. But we don't live in normal times. Vaping is itself an emotional, hot-button topic, and anything Trump does is automatically controversial. That's how the very same policy has critics worrying that it doesn't do enough [5] and advocates claiming that it goes too far [6] (specifically, by encouraging the development of a black market, which was ultimately responsible for the vaping associated deaths [7] that occurred in recent months).

It would seem that the best way to prevent teen use of e-cigarettes would be to implement a ban on purchases by anyone under age 21, the same policy we have with alcohol. But that's already happened. Congress passed and the President signed a bill [8] raising the legal age for the purchase of tobacco and vaping products to 21. It seems that critics will only be happy if e-cigarettes are completely banned, but that's a ridiculous position.

U-Haul One-Ups Everybody

You were probably wondering, "What does U-Haul think of all this?" Apparently, other people at the company were thinking the exact same thing. The moving company decided that it will no longer hire anyone who uses nicotine -- vapers, smokers, nicotine gum chewers, patch wearers, anybody. Why? Who knows. Maybe they want to lower health insurance costs.

But the move was decried by a writer at Slate [9] as "draconian." The author is correct. As she mentions, this prevents former smokers -- who still rely on nicotine -- from getting a job with U-Haul. That is stupid. It's also legally questionable, since it's not clear if U-Haul can discriminate against an entire group of people (though nicotine users are obviously not a protected class).

U-Haul's new policy was an unnecessary, self-inflicted wound involving a hot-button topic which makes everyone angry. What on Earth was management thinking?