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Heather Hall, from Sterling Heights, is an anti-cancer activist who is campaigning to regulate e-cigarettes in Michigan.
Photo by Donna Agusti

Sterling cancer survivor campaigns for e-cigarette regulations

By: Eric Czarnik (/reporterbio/eric-czarnik) | **Sterling Heights Sentry**

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STERLING HEIGHTS — Heather Hall has fought three bouts of cancer, and she doesn't want anyone else to experience what she has gone through.

"Being diagnosed at 21 years old, I was a senior at Central Michigan University when I was diagnosed with bone cancer," she said. "I underwent a 13-month chemotherapy (session) and surgery that replaced my femur with a titanium rod.

"It was a difficult thing to go through. ... Cancer is a tough, tough thing to live through, to be frank."

Today Hall, 43, from Sterling Heights, is undergoing treatment for breast cancer. But at the same time, she is a volunteer for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, where she currently is campaigning to regulate e-cigarettes.

Hall said e-cigarettes are already treated as a tobacco product at the federal level. But Michigan, she said, doesn't follow the federal standard.

She wants Michigan to declare e-cigarettes as tobacco products and limit their availability to minors. She said that in recent years, there has been a major jump in e-cigarette use nationally among high school students. She said many people don't realize that they can be as unhealthy as a typical cigarette or tobacco product, adding that often they are marketed with fun flavors, like tropical fruit.

Hall said the Michigan Legislature has been working on Senate bills 106 and 155. The legislation includes the statement that a "vapor product includes an electronic cigarette." The bills also, according to the House Fiscal Agency, would ban sales of vapor products and alternative nicotine products to minors. That legislation passed the state Senate in April and passed the state House May 15.

But Hall said she doesn't believe that legislation is comprehensive enough. Another bill being drafted should provide more comprehensive protection and "clarity to law enforcement and public health officials on how the product should be treated," she said.

"I obviously understand the impact of cancer on somebody," she said. "If we can prevent starting a habit, I think it's our job to protect the youth."

Hall is not alone in trying to further regulate e-cigarettes in Michigan.

Sterling Heights City Councilman Henry Yanez worked on trying to pass e-cigarette legislation in 2016, back when he was a state representative. He said one of the biggest obstacles to success was pushback from the vaping industry, which produces the vaping juice and e-liquids.

"These are independent business people whose lives are based on people buying a product that they make," he said. "The fact of the matter is ... the base of that product is nicotine, in a liquid form, that is a highly addictive substance.

"The other issue was, frankly, the state Legislature wasn't interested in moving this legislation forward. I frankly don't know why — if it was for political reasons or if they didn't believe it was a problem."

The American Vaping Association, a nonprofit that does advocacy to help businesses associated with vaping or electronic cigarettes, says e-cigarettes differ from typical cigarettes in that they allow the user to inhale nicotine, but contain no tobacco and don't burn.

"Indeed, the name 'e-cigarette' is slowly dropping out of fashion among users," the association's website says. "Many people now call them personal vaporizers, vaping products or simply vapes.

"The original name of 'e-cigarette' was chosen for marketing reasons as a way to let smokers know that the devices were an alternative to cigarettes, but it's also confused a lot of people into believing that they are cigarettes."

Bryan Lewis, the CEO of Intellicheck, said the problem with some legislation banning vaping products and e-cigarettes for minors is that it's easy to acquire fake IDs online, "and you cannot tell with the naked eye that it's not real."

He said Intellicheck has let hundreds of alcohol, cannabis and tobacco product retailers authenticate IDs and detect fakes. He added that 2.4 percent of IDs scanned by tobacco retailers are deemed fakes.

"You can raise the (age) limit to whatever you want — unless there's also legislation in there that says the retailer needs to authenticate the ID, this is an example where the technology has outpaced the law," he said.

Find out more about the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network by visiting www.fightcancer.org. Find out more about Intellicheck by visiting www.intellicheck.com. For the American Vaping Association, visit vaping.org.