

FACT SHEET



Protecting Child Laborers in Tobacco

HB 876

Problem: Children in agriculture lack the same protections other child workers receive. On tobacco farms, this exposes youth to toxic carcinogens, leading to health and developmental problems. Parental consent is not currently required to put children in these dangerous situations.

Policy Solution: VICPP supports **HB 876** a bill sponsored by Delegate Lopez to expand child labor protections in the tobacco farming industry by requiring parental permission for children to work on non-family farms. These protections amend worker requirements for all youth, though the specifications are different for those younger than age 16.

Who will benefit? Both current and future generations of children will benefit through limiting potential exposures to nicotine. Parents also benefit from being able to make more informed decisions about their children's work.

What are the negative effects for young people working in tobacco? The most obvious negative effect is acute nicotine poisoning, which results in headache, nausea, and fainting. This particularly affects children touching the wet plants, since it can be absorbed through the skin, but can affect any worker. There are also risks of pesticide exposure and heat related illnesses. Human Rights Watch performed an analysis of youth tobacco farm workers in 2013 and found that tobacco farming was unsafe for anyone under 18. The effects of nicotine contact and exposure to toxic pesticides can also inhibit a child's brain development.

Researchers have found that even rain suits and watertight gloves fail to completely stop absorption of nicotine and other toxins through the skin – meaning no amount of PPE can entirely protect children from tobacco's adverse effects.

Haven't tobacco companies already implemented this change? No. After immense pressure with the Human Rights Watch report, some of the largest tobacco companies chose to limit children under 16 working in tobacco fields. However, this relies on enforcement from within the company, and smaller producers can choose not to comply. In addition, it still allows youth who are under 18 and cannot legally purchase tobacco products to work in the fields. With this law, Virginia will have consistent regulation across the industry.

How will this impact low-income families? This bill still allows children to contribute to family income through other farm work. It also allows parents to sign a waiver to give their child permission to work in tobacco fields. The change simply makes sure there is informed consent.

What will the effect be on small farms? Small farms, just like the large industrial farms, will be required to get a parent or guardian's permission to allow children to work in their tobacco fields. Because of farm consolidation throughout the 1990s, Virginia has very few small-scale tobacco farms. This bill allows children to work on farms owned by family members, so ultimately, a child's parent or guardian can determine what is best for the family.