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August 26, 2003

Jack Valenti, President
Motion Picture Association of America
15503 Ventura Boulevard
Encino, California 91436

Dear Mr. Valenti:

We, the undersigned Attorneys General, write to ask you, with your longstanding prominence and influence in the American motion picture industry, to exercise your exemplary leadership to effect potentially far reaching benefits for public health. A Dartmouth Medical School study released last month confirms what other research has suggested: reducing the prevalence of cigarette smoking in motion pictures could significantly decrease the initiation of smoking in youth. With this new evidence of how effective reducing smoking in motion pictures would be in preventing youth smoking, the motion picture industry stands in a uniquely powerful position to bring about a profoundly beneficial impact on the health and well-being of millions of Americans.

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in each of our states and across the country, accounting for the death of over 400,000 Americans each year -- more people than alcohol, AIDS, car crashes, illegal drugs, murders, and suicides combined.

The good news is that smoking rates have declined -- attributable directly to the major efforts undertaken and sustained at the federal, state and local levels. State attorneys general sued the major tobacco manufacturers resulting in the 1998 historic settlement under which the tobacco companies agreed not only to pay the states \$206 billion dollars but also to make unprecedented changes in the way cigarettes are sold, advertised, and marketed -- especially when it comes to youth. The battle to decrease smoking, especially among our youth, has been waged by public health initiatives at every level of government, by the American Legacy Foundation, and by increases in cigarette excise taxes.

However, despite the declines in youth smoking rates across the country, our teens continue to smoke at an unacceptable rate. Given our knowledge that almost 90% of current adult smokers began smoking as teens, we are disheartened that 28.5% (over 4.5 million) of all high school students smoke, with an estimated 2,000 young people (under age 18) becoming new daily smokers every day. These numbers translate into a horrifying projection: more than 5 million children alive today will die prematurely from their smoking.

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Attorney General Bill Lockyer recently wrote to you asking for industry cooperation on World No Tobacco Day. The motion picture industry holds an enviably powerful position to build upon efforts to reduce youth smoking in this country in a way no one else can. In June, and the impetus for our letter to you now, a research team from the Dartmouth Medical School published the broadest research to date in the growing body of uncontroverted scientific evidence that exposure to smoking in motion pictures has a significant impact on youth initiation of smoking. The study, published in *The Lancet*, provides additional "strong evidence that viewing smoking in movies promotes smoking initiation among adolescents." With funding by the National Cancer Institute, Dr. Madeline Dalton and her research team found that the children, ages 10-14, who watched the highest amount of smoking in movies were almost three (2.71) times more likely to start smoking than those children who watched the least amount of smoking in movies.

While recognizing the need for further study, the researchers offered the following insight:

The effect of exposure to movie smoking is important, both because the effect on smoking initiation is moderately strong and because the exposure is almost universal. Based on the lists of 50 randomly selected movies, only five (0-2%) participants were unexposed to movie smoking. If the link between exposure to smoking in movies and smoking initiation proves to be causal, our data suggest that eliminating adolescents' exposure to movie smoking could reduce smoking initiation by half.

The motion picture industry, therefore, is uniquely situated to bring about sweeping change to prevent youth smoking. Simply by reducing the depiction of smoking in movies, the industry can protect our nation's youth from the known perils of smoking. Mr. Valenti, you have demonstrated your leadership and willingness in the past to join forces to protect our youth from violence in the media. We are hopeful you will use your best efforts again here to rally the motion picture industry to move from being a source of the problem to being recognized as a critically important force in solving the nation's deadly problem of youth smoking.

We look forward to hearing your ideas about how the motion picture industry will pursue this tremendous opportunity. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of this important matter.

Very truly yours,

Attorney General J. Joseph Curran, Jr.
Attorney General of Maryland

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