HOLLYWOOD CHOKES.

Every major studio knows how keep smoking out of its PG-13 films. But progress stopped half a decade ago—leaving a new generation of kids exposed to America’s #1 killer. Why?

T he major studios have known since 2003 that smoking on screen presents a major physical health risk to adolescent audiences. In short: movies sell smoking to millions of kids.

The research evidence mobilized state Attorneys General, triggered three Capitol Hill hearings, and brought pressure from the World Health Organization, leading U.S. health groups, parents and young people themselves. As a result, smoking in G, PG and PG-13 films peaked in 2005 and then declined through 2010.

If that trend had continued, youth-rated films would be 100% smokefree today (see chart at upper right). Instead, progress lurch to a stop. Since 2010, the major studios and independents have released: 210 top-grossing and PG-13 films with smoking, with more than 6,600 tobacco incidents, delivering 60.5 billion tobacco impressions to domestic moviegoers—not including exposures on home media.

The R-rating is the obvious answer. In 2012, rigorous research involving 50,000 kids in more than a dozen countries led the U.S. Surgeon General to conclude that exposure to smoking in Hollywood films causes kids to smoke.

The solution? Update the industry’s R-rating standard to include tobacco imagery. R-rating future films with smoking will give movie producers a market incentive to leave smoking out of the films that kids see most.

The studios and the MPAA are familiar with the R-rating proposal. Health experts first proposed it fifteen years ago. The studios heard it directly at a 2003 Los Angeles briefing. In 2007, when the MPAA commissioned Harvard School of Public Health to recommend policy, Harvard told the film industry, “Eliminate the depiction of tobacco smoking from films accessible to children and youths.”

In 2014, the Surgeon General reported the R-rating would reduce youth smoking by nearly 20 percent. The U.S. CDC estimates that the R-rating would prevent a million tobacco deaths in this generation of kids. So why doesn’t the MPAA update the R-rating to cover the only film content proven to physically harm young audiences?

In Hollywood’s half-measures leave millions of kids exposed.

The MPAA claims to consider smoking in its ratings. Yet its official rating guidelines never mention “tobacco” or “smoking.” The major studios have their own, individual tobacco depiction policies. But these policies are riddled with loopholes that allow smoking in any youth-rated film.

From 2015 to 2016, major studios actually boosted the amount of smoking in their youth-rated films. PG-13 tobacco impressions jumped nearly 60 percent in a single year.

Since the studios choked in 2010, they have left millions of kids exposed to tobacco, America’s #1 killer.

Drop in kid-rated smoking stopped in 2010

Big budgets and big studios still do young viewers the most harm.

Large-budget films from major studios still account for most of the tobacco exposure that kids get from youth-rated movies. Since 2010, the major studios that govern the MPAA and its film rating system have been responsible for:

- 67% of all youth-rated films with smoking,
- 71% of tobacco incidents in youth-rated films,
- 86% of audience exposure from youth-rated films.

As the U.S. Surgeon General and others have reported, Hollywood collaborated with the tobacco industry to sell smoking and tobacco brands for most of the 20th Century. Now, in 2017, movies still push smoking at kids. The studios have exhausted every other option except what will actually work. We need an R-rating that applies to every studio, every producer, every film. Every delay condemns more kids to tobacco addiction, disability, and early death.

We therefore make this specific, time-sensitive demand:

The MPAA’s Classification and Rating Administration must apply an R-rating to any motion picture with tobacco imagery submitted for classification after June 1, 2017.

Exceptions should be limited to films that exclusively portray actual people who used tobacco (as in documentaries or biographical dramas) or that depict the serious health consequences of tobacco use.

One Little Letter R Will Save One Million Lives.