

## Funding cut puts anti-smoking programs in limbo

By **BILL BOWMAN** • STAFF WRITER • May 9, 2010

After 15 years, Kelly Gonzalez wasn't sure she'd ever be able to quit smoking.

The 27-year-old Howell resident said she'd tried to quit "at least 10 times" before she started attending group meetings at the New Brunswick Quit Center about two months ago.

Now, she said, she's about a week away from kicking what she calls her addiction.

The future of state-funded Quit Centers such as the one that helped Gonzalez kick her habit — and all state-sponsored smoking cessation programs — are in limbo because Gov. Chris Christie's proposed fiscal year 2011 budget cuts just about all funding for them.

Included in the \$7.1 million budget cuts is \$5.3 million from school-based and youth anti-smoking programs — such as the REBEL (Reaching Everyone by Exposing Lies) program, whose funding would be reduced from \$5.7 million to about \$400,000.

Also on the chopping block is \$1.8 million from general anti-smoking programs, which would cut funding for those programs to about \$43,000, according to figures from the state Department of Health and Senior Services.

The Christie administration's rationale for cutting the programs' \$7.1 million funding is that existing cancer prevention programs can take up their mission, and that last year's increase in the state's cigarette tax has been an effective deterrent for smokers, especially teens.

New Jersey currently places a \$2.70 tax on each pack of cigarettes, the fourth highest such tax in the nation, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Centers for Disease Control.

Gonzalez said she doubts that a correlation between high cigarette taxes and lower smoking rates exists.

"When you are addicted it doesn't matter how much" the cigarettes cost, she said. "You could have told

me that you were going to chop off my leg and I still would have smoked. They could raise the price of cigarettes to \$10 a pack, and if you're addicted, you're going to pay that."

There are other programs that can help people stop

smoking, said Christie spokesman Kevin Roberts.

"While the proposed budget for next year eliminates line-item funding for certain cessation programs," he said, "anti-tobacco efforts will continue in New Jersey by utilizing existing cancer-prevention resources and the continued leveraging of federal funding."

"New Jerseyans will continue to have access to national tobacco education and cessation resources as well," Roberts said.

The programs to which Roberts refers are the Quitline — a phone counseling service funded by the CDC — and QuitNet, a federally funded website designed to aid those who are trying to stop smoking.

Dr. Susan Walsh, the state's deputy commissioner of public health services, said programs such as REBEL should continue without state funding because they are primarily grass-roots programs.

"We've been very pleased to help them (REBEL) and hope they continue," she said.

"It is a strong student-led movement that we would expect the students would carry on," added state Department of Health and Senior Services' spokeswoman Donna Leusner.

Walsh said two of the state's eight Quit Centers — at Somerset Medical Center in Somerville and Shore Memorial Hospital in Somers Point — are expected to remain open.

Other centers, which are slated to close, are the Mercer County Tobacco Dependence Program in Trenton; Saint Barnabas Quit Centers in Newark and Toms River; the UMDNJ School of Public Health Quit Centers in Newark and New Brunswick and the Virtua Health Quit Center in Mt. Holly.

**As for the state programs now facing the ax, Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of New Jersey GASP (Global Advisors on SmokeFree Policy), said her group will try to "find and discuss a revenue replacement for the funding so that the programs could continue."**

**"Smoking-related illnesses are the number one cause of disease and death in the nation," she said. "With the interest in preventing chronic disease, you can't prevent chronic disease unless tobacco control is addressed and funded. It goes hand in hand."**

The smoking cessation programs were originally funded by the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement, signed in 1998 by the four largest tobacco companies and attorneys general from 46 states, including New Jersey.

But, according to the state Office of Management and Budget's "Budget in Brief" document, beginning with the McGreevey administration, "(t)he decision to use settlement proceeds to support non-health related spending exhausted this once promising source of revenue."

**"We are hoping the administration will consider a replacement for that funding," Blumenfeld said.**

**Blumenfeld said simply raising cigarette taxes may help a little. But statistics show the average person takes seven attempts to stop smoking, and those efforts are magnified if the smoker has someone to turn to for support, she said.**

**"Seventy percent of those who do want to quit need help," she said.**

The state's decision to cut funding for smoking cessation programs seems counter to recommendations made by the CDC in its most recent tobacco survey.

"Fully funding state tobacco programs could make a dramatic difference," the CDC writes in its report, "Tobacco Control State Highlights 2010."

"Research shows that the more states spend on sustained comprehensive tobacco control programs, the greater the reductions in smoking — and the longer states continue to invest in such programs, the greater and faster the impact," the study states.

Even before these proposed cuts, the report noted, as of 2007 New Jersey ranked 36th in terms of states fully funding smoking cessation programs.

Roberta "Bobbie" Tehan, 58, of Somerville is another long-time smoker who credits a Quit Center with helping her kick her addiction.

Tehan said she's quit smoking for about 18 years of the 40 years or so she's had the habit.

But since she's been getting support at the Quit Center at Somerset Medical Center in Somerville, Tehan said, she thinks this time it will stick.

"So far for me the Quit Center was the easiest quit I ever had," she said.

Tehan said she weaned herself off cigarettes through a combination of a medicated patch, a fake "cigarette" inhaler and the support group.

"At least now, I feel like there's some hope," she said.

She said that while Somerset Medical Center's Quit Center will continue to operate, she fears the fees

that are charged to increase.

"All that's going to happen is that the fees are going to be more expensive, and if people don't have great insurance they probably won't use the program," she said.

Walsh said some services offered through the smoking cessation programs are being moved to other departments, such as cancer control, "so we can make sure that smoking cessation becomes part of the overall plan that physicians use. We're trying to bring it to the right people who can help with that."

**Bill Bowman:**

**732-643-4212;**

**[bbowman@app.com](mailto:bbowman@app.com)**