

Star-Ledger May 8, 2009 (front page)

Quit centers see surge after federal tax raises cigarettes' cost

By Carly Rothman

On April 1, a federal tax earmarked for children's health raised the price of a pack of cigarettes by 62 cents. By the beginning of this month, the number of smokers trying to quit through one of New Jersey's seven state-funded smoking cessation clinics had spiked.

Funding for quit centers, however, has declined in recent years, and more cuts are slated for 2010. As the cost of cigarettes pushes more smokers to try quitting, some experts say the centers won't be able to handle the demand.

"We used to have several clinicians treating patients face to face. Now we're down to one. Our clinic coordinator has stacks of appointments," said Michael Steinberg, medical director of the New Brunswick clinic. "We're going to need to start turning people away."

More than 9,200 clients have received free or low-cost counseling at state quit centers since 2001, according to the state Department of Health and Senior Services. Many of these clients struggle financially: In 2008, 25 percent earned less than \$10,000, and Steinberg said some new clients have been hurt by the economy.

"We're seeing many more people without jobs," he said, explaining such stress often triggers the urge to smoke. "There's nothing more stressful than trying to put food on the table and pay the bills."

For many clients, the federal levy brings the cost of cigarettes in New Jersey to a prohibitive level -- \$7-plus a pack.

"For most people, there's a point at which they say, 'I really can't afford this anymore,'" said Fred Jacobs, former commissioner of the state health agency who is now the executive vice president of Saint Barnabas Health Care System. "But trying to stop on your own is notoriously unsuccessful."

Since 2007, state funding for the seven quit centers has dropped from \$864,000 to \$756,000, according to the state Health Department. The proposed 2010 budget calls for cuts of nearly \$38,000 from the quit centers, and \$50,000 from NJQuitline, a toll-free telephone service.

As a result, the New Brunswick clinic has cut staff, and other centers have reduced spending in areas such as public outreach.

Meanwhile the state, which already has the nation's second-highest cigarette tax, is weighing an added 12.5-cent levy for 2010.

"You're making it harder for them to keep smoking, but you're leaving them on their own to stop," said Jacobs, who is also board president of New Jersey GASP, a nonprofit anti-tobacco group.

Donna Leusner, spokeswoman for the state health agency, wrote in an e-mail the cuts were necessary to help plug the state budget deficit. She noted New Jersey's adult smoking rate is 17.1 percent -- 2.6 percent less than the national average.

"New Jersey is facing an unprecedented budget shortfall that has required the state to make tough decisions that have required deep cuts," she wrote.

But Steinberg noted many of his patients are served by Medicaid, arguing investment in quitting programs could prevent more costly medical problems.

"If we prevent their stroke, heart attack, emphysema today, we're going to save the state money in the long run," Steinberg said.

Lucy Yongue, 70, a home health aide from New Brunswick, has been smoking for 52 years but recently tried the Tobacco Dependence Clinic at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey School of Public Health in New Brunswick.

"I have come off crack cocaine, alcohol, diet pills, and lost 44 pounds on Weight Watchers, and I still can't cut out the cigarettes," Yongue said.

Yongue, who is diagnosed with emphysema, said she was more motivated to quit by health concerns than cost, noting she often buys cigarettes out of state to avoid New Jersey's high prices.

Nonetheless, Yongue said she's already seeing the financial benefit of laying off the smokes.

"It's in my checking account," she said.