



Everything Jersey

N.J. among the worst tobacco-fighting states: Opinion

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By

Star-Ledger Guest Columnist



A Phillipsburg mother wants the town to ban smoking at school bus stops.

Express-Times Photo | SUE BEYER

By Blair Horner

We've known for a while that a lack of funding for New Jersey's tobacco prevention program hurt its effectiveness. Now, it has hit a new low on a national stage.

"A Broken Promise to Our Children: The 1998 State Tobacco Settlement 14 Years Later,"

recently released by the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights, reviewed states' spending on tobacco-control

programs. The report ranked New Jersey 50th in spending on its program to help smokers to quit and to keep kids from starting.

The report used recommendations issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as its benchmark. The CDC recommends New Jersey spend roughly 10 cents of every dollar raised from tobacco revenues on programs to reduce tobacco use.

More than 4,300 New Jerseyans die from smoking-related cancers each year. Despite successes in curbing tobacco use over the past four decades, it remains the leading preventable cause of death in the United States.

Curbing tobacco use is supposed to be a top priority of policymakers. The 50 states collectively have the resources to effectively combat tobacco. In the current budget year, the states will collect a record \$25.7 billion from tobacco taxes and other revenues.

New Jersey reaps nearly \$1 billion in revenue from tobacco each year, but the state appears to rely exclusively on a small amount of federal dollars to fund its tobacco prevention and cessation efforts. When these programs are cut, more kids start to smoke, fewer smokers quit, health care costs go up and, worst of all, more people die from tobacco use.

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Tobacco prevention isn't just the right thing to do — it's the smart thing to do. Tobacco prevention programs save lives and money by reducing tobacco-related health care costs.

A December 2011 study in the American Journal of Public Health found that, between 2000 and 2009, Washington state saved more than \$5 in health care costs for every \$1 spent on tobacco prevention and cessation by reducing hospitalizations for heart disease, strokes, respiratory diseases and cancer caused by tobacco use.

These aren't just long-term savings; tobacco control can have immediate benefits. A 2012 George Washington University study found that, when the Massachusetts Medicaid program covered a comprehensive smoking cessation benefit, the state saw \$3 in health care savings for every \$1 invested in just 18 months.

Tobacco use costs the nation nearly \$100 billion a year in total health care bills. In New Jersey, the tab is more than \$3 billion, including \$1 billion paid by Medicaid. Tobacco prevention programs can reduce these costs.

Virtually all smokers start as kids — tobacco companies rely on children as the next generation of smokers and the industry spends billions targeting youth. Tobacco companies spend about \$8.5 billion nationwide every year, marketing their deadly products, or nearly \$1 million every hour. Only through a comprehensive, integrated tobacco-prevention program, focused on public education and advertising to youth, can the state counter Big Tobacco's influence.

That's not to say that there haven't been successes. Youth smoking has fallen by more than half since 1997. But 19 percent of adults and 18 percent of high school students still smoke, and another 1,000 kids become regular smokers each day.

New Jersey's failure to use more of its tobacco money to fight smoking is especially troubling in light of national surveys indicating that smoking declines in states have slowed. The state's progress against tobacco use — the No. 1 cause of preventable death — is at risk unless it increases funding for tobacco prevention and cessation programs.

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