



Everything Jersey

## N.J. anti-smoking spending is 'embarrassing,' American Cancer Society says

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Susan K. Livio/Statehouse Bureau

**TRENTON** — The state's decision to spend only \$600,000 this year to help smokers quit and prevent kids from getting addicted is "embarrassing," according to leaders of the American Cancer Society and Heart Association, which ranked New Jersey 46th in the nation for its anti-smoking efforts.

The public health groups used Wednesday's "Great American Smokeout," a national smoking cessation event, to call attention to New Jersey's decision to use nearly all of its proceeds from a national settlement with tobacco companies and cigarette taxes to help plug a huge budget deficit.

"The fact that New Jersey has one of the highest tobacco taxes in the country and spends less than 0.1 percent of its extensive tobacco revenue on prevention programs is unconscionable," said Howard Levite, spokesman for the American Heart Association.

But State Deputy Health Commissioner Susan Walsh called the ranking "unfair" because it does not take into account \$2.6 million New Jersey gets for disease management and prevention from the federal government that address nicotine addiction.

About \$475,000 of state money is spent on inspectors who visit stores to make sure patrons younger than 19 are not buying cigarettes, Walsh said. Another \$100,000 of state funding goes to the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey to train professionals whose patients want to quit smoking.

"It's not a complete picture. We manage far more" than \$600,000, Walsh said.

Gov. Chris Christie's budget approved by the Legislature took \$7.5 million used last year on smoking cessation programs and transferred nearly all of it to the general fund.

"The state is otherwise so advanced – leaders in comprehensive cancer control with a model program," said Arnold Baskies, board president of the American Cancer Society for New York and New Jersey. "But this data is embarrassing to the state."

Baskies said he worries the most about the loss of anti-tobacco programs in schools. "The data show once you start smoking as a youth it's extremely difficult to break that habit," he said. Hospitals have stepped in to continue running five "quit-centers" the state founded to offer assistance to for smokers who want to kick the habit.

Saint Barnabas runs two centers at a cost of \$102,000 each, said hospital executive vice president Fred Jacobs, a former state health commissioner and current chairman of the anti-smoking organization NJ BREATHE. A group is forming to bring back the school programs, he said.

"This was an abdication of leadership on some philosophical principle that made public health suffer," Jacobs said.

The rankings are based on data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which recommended New Jersey spend \$120 million this year on smoking prevention and cession programs from the \$961 million it gets from the 1998 settlement with the major tobacco companies. About 17 percent of high school students in New Jersey smoke, up from 15.8 percent of teenagers in the last survey, according to the report.

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A cigarette lies in an ashtray in Essen, western Germany, on July 6, 2010.

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