

State must fund tobacco programs

September 21, 2010

It's wrong that New Jersey, despite a wealth of tobacco cash, doesn't fund smoking cessation programs.

There's an old saying about how an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

So it goes with smoking.

To put dollar figures on it, each pack of cigarettes in New Jersey, selling at a price of \$7.48, ends up costing the state's economy \$30.29 in health care for smoking-related diseases, lost time at work and premature death. The study that produced these numbers was done by the American Lung Association, a nonprofit that campaigns against smoking.

Overall, the economic toll of smoking on New Jersey in 2009 was \$8.3 billion according to researchers at Penn State University, as reported by The Record of Bergen County.

So we get back to one small, but important, expenditure that was cut from the state budget this year as Gov. Chris Christie worked to close a nearly \$11 billion spending deficit.

Last year the state spent \$7 million on smoking cessation programs. This year it is spending zero. This despite a river of tobacco money that flows into New Jersey -- about \$1 billion a year. That money comes into state coffers from the \$2.70 per-pack state tax on cigarettes (the average state tax on cigarettes is \$1.38 per pack) and the legal settlement state governments reached with the major U.S. tobacco companies a decade ago. Since 2001, New Jersey has received no less than \$220 million per year from that settlement. Last year, New Jersey got \$287.4 million, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, which keeps track of tobacco settlement funds sent to each state.

With so much tobacco money coming in and with so much on the line in terms of financial costs to employers, to the state and to smokers themselves and their families, it is shameful that New Jersey has

given up putting any money toward smoking cessation programs that have proved their worth over the years in helping people quit. The state spent an estimated \$120 million last year on smokers' health care costs.

We implore Gov. Chris Christie and the Legislature to come back to this seemingly forgotten issue. A portion of the per-pack cigarette tax receipts should be, by law, dedicated to funding strong smoking cessation and prevention programs in New Jersey.

With all we know about the ills and the costs of smoking, to spend a fraction of the money tobacco generates every year on these programs is not too much to ask or expect.

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Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

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