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## **Tax hike offers new incentive for smokers to quit**

**Posted by Fred M. Jacobs/ Star-Ledger Guest Columnist**

If the devastating health consequences don't provide enough incentive, the new 62-cents-per-pack federal tax increase on cigarettes -- which brings the total federal tax on cigarettes to \$1 -- gives smokers another reason to quit.

Yet, at a time when they are most motivated to kick the habit, state funding for smoking cessation programs is being gutted in New Jersey. Only seven of the original 17 state-funded quit centers remain open, due to inadequate funding. If we truly want to save lives and billions of taxpayer dollars each year, policy-makers must ensure smokers have easy access to smoking cessation products and programs that have proven successful.

Imagine a 30-student classroom of youngsters killed every day for a year. That would equal the number of people in New Jersey who die annually from smoking-related causes. Half of all smokers will die because of the habit. As the No. 1 cause of preventable death, accounting for a third of all cancer fatalities, tobacco use places a heavy financial burden on businesses and government: an estimated \$4.7 billion annually for medical services and lost productivity in New Jersey alone.

Raising the price of cigarettes is a powerful, proven smoking deterrent, according to a 2007 policy paper by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The effectiveness of price hikes may reflect the fact that smoking is more common among people less able to afford expensive habits. A poll by the Pew Research Center found two-thirds of American smokers earn less than \$50,000. By contrast, only 13 percent of smokers earn more than \$100,000 a year.

Surveys indicate many smokers want to break the habit. *Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy (GASP)* estimates about 70 percent of the smoking population (850,000 state residents) want to quit but 97 percent can't without help. The Tobacco Dependence Clinic at UMDNJ School of Public Health reports its new patient rosters have doubled in size since the middle of March as smokers anticipated the federal tax increase that took effect April 1. The federal tax hike comes on top of New Jersey state tobacco taxes that are among the highest in the country, exceeded only by New York's and Rhode Island's.

Complementing the price increases, more measures now exist to help people successfully stop smoking. The quit centers offer therapy and support services, medications approved by the Food and Drug Administration and over-the-counter treatments such as nicotine gum, patches and lozenges also are among the available options.

From a public policy perspective, New Jersey has adopted some meaningful measures consistent with the spirit of the CDC's National Tobacco Control Program, which calls for all states to implement comprehensive tactics to prevent people from taking up the habit and to increase the number of people giving it up. The state's pioneering laws banning smoking in public places provide important support to the anti-smoking campaign. New Jersey can take pride that the state has the second highest number of smoke-free beach and park ordinances of any state except California.

While state policies have made it increasingly difficult for smokers to light up, New Jersey isn't doing enough to help them never light up again.

The Institute of Medicine concurs with the CDC in its conclusion that substantial and enduring reductions in tobacco use depend on the enactment and enforcement of a broad range of steps. Crucial among these is providing adequate funds for quitters' support services and ensuring health insurance coverage is available for effective cessation interventions, such as medical

treatments. Despite this conclusion, not one state in the country is funding prevention and cessation programs at the CDC-recommended level and only nine states have allocated funds amounting to half.

New Jersey has gutted cessation program budgets by 70 percent since 2003, which now stand at less than \$8 million, down from \$30 million. No new legislative initiatives have been brought forward to emphasize the importance of mandating insurance coverage for people who must stop smoking and can't pay for the services and treatments they need.

According to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, businesses are losing \$2.2 billion in annual costs related to lost productivity, smoking breaks and disability costs. The CDC puts the figure at \$3,856 a year for every smoking employee. Employers have an opportunity to reduce those costs by helping employees quit smoking. Offering insurance that provides comprehensive affordable coverage for all FDA-approved cessation options will save money, lives and increase workplace productivity.

New Jersey can't afford to ignore the facts: each year ten thousand lives and billions of dollars go up in smoke unnecessarily. With more and more smokers looking to break their addiction to tobacco now, smoking cessation support must be made easily available.

*Fred M. Jacobs, former commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, is the executive vice president of Saint Barnabas Health Care System and president of the Board of Trustees of GASP.*



AP Photo/New York Public Library. An image from the New York Public Library featuring cigarette ads from the 1920s through the '50s when the tobacco industry used trustworthy figures to suggest that smoking was harmless.

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