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N.J. advocates ask Gov. Christie to keep anti-tobacco programs in budget

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[Susan K. Livio/Statehouse Bureau](#)

TRENTON — Laura Alshamie started smoking in the eighth grade, believing it was “a stress-reliever.”

She would have continued lighting up, the Charter Tech High School student from Atlantic County said yesterday, were it not for the school-based program Reaching Everyone By Exposing Lies.

“REBEL not only saved my life, it saved many others,” the 16-year-old Somers Point resident said.

Alshamie told her story during a Statehouse press conference to call attention to how Gov. Chris Christie’s proposed budget would eliminate the state’s \$7.5 million anti-tobacco programs, including REBEL.

If the Legislature doesn’t restore the money for the budget year that begins July 1, “New Jersey will be the worst state in the country when it comes to the support of tobacco-control programs. That’s an embarrassment,” said Fred Jacobs, a former state health commissioner and the current chairman of anti-smoking organization NJ BREATHEES.

More than 10,000 people last year used the state’s hotline, online counseling services and clinics to stop smoking, according to NJ BREATHEES. The money also supports 170 high school and 119 middle school anti-tobacco groups and has helped cut teen smoking rates in half.

New Jersey once dedicated \$30 million a year to anti-tobacco efforts, but budget cuts over the years eroded funding to \$7.5 million this year, Jacobs said. He said Christie’s budget, if approved by the Legislature, eliminates the funding entirely.

“We are trying to avert what would be a public health disaster,” added Jacobs, a physician who specializes in pulmonary diseases. “Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death.”

The state Senate president and other Democratic leaders are aware of the budget cut and are mulling whether they can restore it, Derek Roseman said, spokesman for the Senate Majority Office.

“The governor’s proposal to gut the state’s anti-tobacco programs is one of a number of short-sighted cuts we have deep concerns with, and those concerns have been brought to the administration’s attention,” he said.