

At \$0, Nevada ranks 50th in nation for spending on anti-smoking efforts

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Tuesday, December 13, 2011

We fortunately live in a time in which former smokers now outnumber active smokers in Nevada. Smoking rates across all age groups have declined for the past decade and the vast majority of workplaces in Nevada now ban indoor smoking.

By reducing smoking rates and exposure to second-hand smoke, we have made important strides in decreasing smoking-related illnesses and health care costs in Nevada.

Most of these gains are a direct result of community-level tobacco control programs implemented over the past decade – outreach and intervention strategies supported primarily through annual payments received by the State of Nevada as a result of the master settlement agreement between states and the tobacco companies in 1998.

“Tobacco control” includes wide ranging efforts by local health departments and public health advocates to monitor tobacco use in Nevada and to protect the public from exposure to second-hand smoke. Tobacco control also includes programs and services offering help to those wanting to quit tobacco use through helplines and cessation services, warning the public about the dangers of tobacco, and enforcing bans on tobacco marketing and promotion. These evidence-based efforts have saved lives and saved money by reducing tobacco-related medical costs.

A key element of any effective tobacco control strategy is the investments we make in programs to prevent kids from smoking in the first place, since most smokers initiate smoking and become addicted to nicotine as teenagers. In fact, nearly 90 percent of all smokers begin smoking before the age of 18. In Nevada, programs like Teens Against Tobacco Use (TATU) and Not on Tobacco (NOT) have been instrumental factors in the reduction youth tobacco initiation and use over the past decade – youth smoking rates in Nevada have dropped from 33 to 14 percent since 1999.

Unfortunately, smoking continues to be the leading preventable cause of death in Nevada and declines in smoking rates appear to have stalled. Currently, 21 percent of adults and 17 percent of high school students in Nevada still smoke. An estimated 3,300 Nevadans will die this year from diseases caused by smoking.

The costs associated with tobacco use are equally staggering. This year Nevadan’s will spend nearly \$600 million on health care costs directly caused by smoking. Moreover, Nevada residents’ annual state and federal tax burden from smoking-related government expenditures (what Medicare and Medicaid spend to treat smoking related disease and disability) is an estimated \$548 per household.

Tobacco use thus remains a massive public health problem for our generation and for future generations of Nevadans – smokers and non-smokers alike – stuck with the health care tab for disease and disability associated with the scourge that is tobacco.

State ranks last – again

Against this backdrop comes an alarming report from the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, *A Broken Promise to Our Children: The 1998 State Tobacco Settlement 13 Years Later*. The report assesses whether Nevada and other states are keeping their promise to use a significant portion of tobacco settlement funds to attack the enormous public health problems posed by tobacco use. We're not.

The report indicates that Nevada currently receives \$147 million in settlement dollars. From this amount, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that Nevada spend \$32.5 million to conduct an effective, comprehensive tobacco control program or a modest 22 percent of what we receive each year from settlement payments.

Nevada currently allocates \$0 a year for tobacco prevention and cessation – a figure that ranks Nevada 50th among US states in state funding of tobacco prevention programs and dead last in the amount of CDC-recommended state spending on tobacco control.

In 1999, state law divided Nevada's settlement money into three trust funds: 40 percent to the Millennium Trust Fund for college scholarships; 10 percent to the Trust Fund for Public Health; and 50 percent to the Fund for a Healthy Nevada. Initially, 20 percent of the money directed to the Fund for a Healthy Nevada was distributed to tobacco cessation and prevention efforts. That number was whittled down to 15 percent in the 2007 legislative session and simply eliminated by lawmakers earlier this year.

In fiscal year 2012, there will be no state funding for tobacco prevention and cessation in Nevada. Despite master settlement payments to Nevada totaling nearly \$150 million during each year of the current biennium, tobacco control efforts in Nevada are running on fumes and supported solely by federal dollars received by local public health districts through grants from the CDC and on-time stimulus and health reform appropriations.

This unconscionable state of affairs reflects nothing less than cowardice on the part of state lawmakers who have broken our state's promise to use some portion of tobacco settlement to address and prevent the toll of tobacco use in Nevada. Equally unconscionable is the lack of vision and willingness to abandon tobacco control in the name of no new taxes, despite the horrific toll of tobacco on the public's health and purse and despite the fact that tobacco companies will spend nearly \$95 million this year to market their poison in Nevada.

Noting that tobacco remains the leading cause of preventable death in Nevada and that tobacco prevention and cessation programs work, the report concludes that "elected leaders lack credible excuses for failing to do more to protect our children from tobacco and help smokers quite."

The report, *A Broken Promise to Our Children: The 1998 State Tobacco Settlement 13 Years Later* and additional information on the work undertaken by the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids can be found at <http://www.tobaccofreekids.org>.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and President Elect of the Nevada Public Health Association.