

Funds can help cut youth tobacco use in Nevada

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Through the end of April, state health officials are giving the public an opportunity to weigh in on the best use our state's share of tobacco settlement dollars. The on-line survey's first question asks respondents to identify, in five words or less, the one service most worthy of support from the state's Tobacco Settlement Fund.

My top choice? Youth tobacco control and prevention.

Many worthy programs will be vying for settlement funds, yet it bears noting that smoking continues to kill more Nevadans than alcohol, AIDS, car crashes, illegal drugs, murders, and suicides combined. It's also worth noting that only \$1 million of the estimated \$38 million Nevada will receive this year from the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement is dedicated to tobacco control.

We couldn't have a clearer understanding of the public health catastrophe represented by youth tobacco use in Nevada. Most adult smokers in Nevada were hooked before their 21st birthday and an estimated 41,000 kids in our state under the age of 18 will ultimately die prematurely from smoking.

Fortunately, we have an abundant body of well-vetted best practices at our disposal to reverse these threats. We also possess millions of MSA dollars to finance such work. All we now lack is the political resolve to target MSA dollars toward their original aim: reducing the death, disability, and medical costs associated with tobacco use in Nevada.

Over the past decade, we have made steady progress in reducing the public health toll of tobacco and youth smoking in Nevada. However, local tobacco prevention efforts have recently been starved of critical funding as state lawmakers have diverted millions of settlement dollars to the general fund since the onset of the great recession.

The recently released Nevada Youth Behavior Risk Factor Survey Report provides encouraging evidence of the impact of adequately funded prevention strategies on youth cigarette smoking. In particular, Clark County teen smoking rates are now at an all-time low of 7.8 percent – down substantially from rates four times as high in the late 1990s. Most of that improvement has been a product of hard-hitting, evidence-based youth prevention programs implemented by the small, but mighty tobacco prevention program at the Southern Nevada Health District.

Ironically, a good deal of that progress in Las Vegas was underwritten by one-shot federal funding originating from the American Recovery and Reinvestment – efforts that will be jeopardized if the district’s current portion of tobacco settlement funding isn’t increased soon.

Indeed, all of Nevada’s youth prevention programs, including those operating in rural areas and northern Nevada, would be able to provide effective programs that would quickly reduce teen tobacco use rates if funding was increased.

To paraphrase anthropologist Margaret Mead, never doubt that a thoughtful, committed group of public health professionals can improve the health and well-being of Nevada. Imagine what could be done with the right amount funding from the Tobacco Settlement Fund?

To participate in the survey, visit dhhs.nv.gov/Grants/2014_GMAC_CNASurvey.htm before April 30.

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