

Anti-smoking groups want N.J. to increase funding to help smokers quit

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Laurent Fiefet/AFP/Getty Images

The American Cancer Society wants to raise about \$30 million for smoking prevention and cessation programs.

TRENTON — For every dollar New Jersey collects in tobacco revenue, it spends less than a penny on programs that help people stop smoking or never start.

Anti-tobacco advocacy groups say they want the state to spend 12 cents, phased-in over four years, to fulfill a "moral obligation," and protect the health of thousands of people who will get sick and possibly die from smoking related illnesses.

Over the last decade, state lawmakers have whittled away spending on state-sponsored smoking cessation programs from \$30 million to \$1.5 million, said Jennifer Sullivan of the American Cancer Society and coauthor of "Up in Smoke, a report released yesterday. But the state collected \$750 million in tobacco taxes last fiscal year and spent \$240 million in proceeds from a national settlement with tobacco companies, the report says.

With New Jersey imposing the sixth-highest cigarette tax in the nation, at \$2.70 a pack, "We believe the money is there," Sullivan said during a Statehouse press conference in Trenton.

"When you talk to these people they have very often tried to stop smoking but don't have the support to do it," said Howard Levite, medical director of the Heart Institute at AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center. "This is where the failing of the state is identified."

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The plan would enable New Jersey, which has 1 million smokers, to spend about \$120 million, the amount recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the report says.

Because of recent cuts, New Jersey no longer funds youth anti-tobacco groups and support networks for adults, said Fred Jacobs, executive vice-president from Barnabas Health Care System and a former state health commissioner. "If government won't act to protect the health and safety of the people it services, then what is the role of government?" he said.

The state Department of Health and Senior Services issued a statement in response, noting: "There are many ways to get help that weren't available just a few years ago." More insurance companies are providing coverage for prescription drugs, gum and patches. People without health insurance or those on Medicaid may call NJQuitline for help, at 866-NJSTOPS.

New Jersey's smoking rate among adults was 14.8 percent last year, "significantly below the national rate of 18.4 percent," the health department said. About 11,200 New Jersey adults die each year from smoking related illnesses, the report said.

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