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## Editorial: Let's clear the air

For nonsmokers living in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and other states with indoor smoking bans, these should be the best of times: The ashtrays have been removed from workplaces, and customers no longer have to gag on cigarette smoke at their favorite restaurant, bar, or nightspot.

But the latest government assessment on smoking rates and exposure to secondhand smoke shows that the nation's battle to stem smoking - and the 443,000 annual deaths it causes - has ground to a standstill.

After a decades-long public-health campaign that reduced smoking by half, the effort to safeguard more Americans has been stuck for five years. One in five adults identify themselves as smokers, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - a rate that has held steady since 2005.

CDC officials also reported this week that, while fewer people are being exposed to dangerous secondhand smoke, more than half of all young children under age 11 still spend time around smokers, usually at home.

That means tobacco companies are fighting back, and winning. With upward of \$12 billion a year spent on tobacco-product marketing, the reductions in smoking rates and secondhand exposure could reverse over time - and head in the wrong direction.

It's probably unimaginable that any states would repeal smoke-free laws, even if more people took up the deadly habit. But casinos in Pennsylvania and Atlantic City already secured exemptions, making them no-go zones for anyone aware of the dire health risks.

Besides, the status quo on smoking is unacceptable. With smoking rates around the national average - higher than many states - Pennsylvania pays a steep price in lost worker productivity and increased health-care costs. Even with New Jersey's under 16 percent of adults smoking, the personal and economic toll is troubling.

So the CDC has the right idea: Government public-health policymakers must counter tobacco companies' relentless push for new customers by expanding smoke-free laws to 22 states without such protections, raising cigarette taxes, and deploying aggressive ad campaigns and smoking-cessation programs.

That will take money, yet state funding for tobacco prevention efforts has been whittled down to less than \$570 million a year, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. Pennsylvania and New Jersey are among the worst offenders, both earning a grade of "F" from the American Lung Association in 2009 for funding and support for tobacco-control programs.

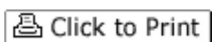
With so many lives hanging in the balance from smoking, the nation has to press harder on efforts to stop smoking.

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Go to [www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns](http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns) to read the CDC reports.

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