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N.J. must do better on tobacco prevention efforts: Opinion

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Zero. That's an important number in New Jersey's fight against smoking. No, zero is not the number of New Jersey children and teens who smoke. Nor is zero the amount of money spent treating illnesses caused by smoking. And zero is certainly not the number of smoking-related deaths here in the Garden State.

Instead, zero is the amount of state funding for tobacco prevention in New Jersey. This is deplorable, because we can do better than zero. Every other state does. By spending nothing — zero — on tobacco prevention, New Jersey is putting the health of its kids and families at risk. And not just physical health. Given the old adage about the value of an ounce of prevention, New Jersey may also be putting its long-term financial health at risk.

In its tobacco prevention efforts — as highlighted in a report the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released with the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and other health groups on Dec. 11 -- the Garden State lags conspicuously behind other states that do much better than zero. New Jersey is second only to Maryland in median family income, with Connecticut, Massachusetts and Hawaii rounding out the top five. But when it comes to funding tobacco prevention, our income peers far outspend us: for anti-tobacco efforts Maryland budgets \$8.5 million, Connecticut \$3.5 million, Massachusetts \$3.9 million, and Hawaii \$7.5 million.

Given all the other issues we face in New Jersey, some may say that smoking is no longer the pressing issue it once was, and certainly not an issue worthy of taxpayer dollars. After all, we've made great strides

in recent years. In the late 1980s, 27.9 percent of New Jerseyans were smokers. Today, New Jersey has the fifth lowest smoking rate of any state, and from 2012 to 2013, smoking rates decreased by 1.6 percentage points.

But progress doesn't mean we can rest. Smoking still kills. Restaurants may be smoke-free and smoking in the workplace may, thankfully, be an artifact of the "Mad Men" days, but New Jersey nevertheless has a tobacco problem. Currently, 15.7 percent of residents 18 and older in New Jersey smoke. Among New Jersey high school students, 12.9 percent smoke.

This year, and every year, 11,800 New Jersey adults die from smoking-related causes. Ultimately, 143,000 New Jersey kids alive today will die prematurely because of smoking.

Others may protest that we can't afford to prevent smoking. In fact, we can't afford not to. Smoking depletes the coffers of the state as it wrecks the bodies of its citizens. When the state neglects prevention, we all pay the bill—a bill that totals significantly more than zero.

Annually, New Jersey spends \$4.06 billion on costs for ailments directly caused by smoking (with Medicaid only covering \$967 million). Lost productivity due to smoking amounts to \$2.6 billion. To put this in perspective, state and federal taxes from smoking-related government spending cost each household in the state \$654 a year. Given smoking's astronomical financial toll, some might wonder what happened to the 1998 Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) money that was intended to fund prevention initiatives.

Unfortunately, in New Jersey, that money was diverted to other purposes, and is no longer available for prevention initiatives.

Whether you view this as responsible stewardship of the state budget or as an affront to the spirit of the original agreement, we can all agree that underfunding anti-tobacco efforts harms public health. How much money would have been available, if the state made other

choices? In 2013, New Jersey received more than \$396 million from the MSA, and as of June 24, 2014, it received more than \$204 million. In light of these numbers, the CDC's recommendation that New Jersey spend \$103.3 million on prevention seems more than reasonable.

We know that tobacco prevention programs work. When states use these funds to mount aggressive advertising campaigns, social media outreach, community partnerships, and quit-smoking programs, the results are impressive. Florida, with one of the strongest and longest-running tobacco prevention programs, saw its high school smoking rate fall to 7.5 percent in 2014, the lowest on record in the state and second lowest in the country, behind only Utah.

When it comes to prevention, New Jersey has zeros in the wrong column. That's no way to build a Culture of Health in our home state. Spending the CDC-recommended amount on tobacco prevention could help put those zeros in the right column: zero teens who smoke; zero adults who smoke; zero spent on tobacco-related healthcare costs; and ultimately, zero deaths from tobacco.

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