

Tobacco revenue misused

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Sunday, January 4, 2015

Despite our state's lengthy history of miserly investments in disease control and prevention, the upcoming legislative session affords Nevada policymakers with an opportunity to reassess how our state's spending priorities impact the public's health. The perfect starting place in this conversation is how our state will use tobacco revenues over the course of the next biennium.

In the current budget year, the State of Nevada will collect \$143 million in revenue from the 1998 tobacco master settlement agreement and tobacco taxes. However, Nevada will only spend \$1 million on programs to prevent kids from smoking and help smokers quit this year – spending well below the annual funding level of \$30 million recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to implement a comprehensive tobacco control program.

In other words, Nevada will spend less than one cent of every dollar in tobacco-generated revenue to fight the scourge of tobacco in our state.

Lawmakers' ongoing failure to adequately fund tobacco prevention not only undermines the public health community's efforts to reduce tobacco use – the number one cause of preventable death in Nevada – current spending policy is indefensible given the burden of tobacco-related health care costs, now estimated at \$1.1 billion per year in Nevada, not to mention the medical costs borne by Nevada taxpayers. A recent estimate from the CDC pegged the average state and federal tax burden from smoking-caused government expenditures at \$541 per household in Nevada.

Despite impressive victories in the battle against big tobacco – for example, youth smoking rates in Clark County have plummeted from 30.7% in 1999 to 7.3% in 2013 – plenty of unfinished work remains. Currently, 19.4 percent of adults and 10.3 percent of high school students in Nevada smoke. Moreover, tobacco industry marketing outguns total state spending on tobacco prevention in Nevada by a ratio of nearly 75 to 1.

Over the past decade, more than one lawmaker has told me that revenue shortfalls have forced their hand and that they've had no other option but to raid settlement funds simply to square state budgets. Such self-serving hogwash underscores the ease to which successive legislatures have failed to honor the promise made by states to use a significant portion of settlement funds to address the disease and disability caused by smoking in Nevada.

Like most states, Nevada continues to possess an abundance of resources at its disposal to fund tobacco prevention at CDC-recommended levels and a solid evidence base of measures known to reduce and prevent tobacco use. What remains in short supply, however, is the political will to reverse our current use of settlement dollars and other tobacco-generated revenue.

What is past need not be prologue. In 2015, Nevada lawmakers have an opportunity to right these wrongs and, in doing so, save lives and save money by reducing the human suffering and financial toll of tobacco in our state.

Additional information on tobacco prevention and the burden of tobacco in Nevada is available from the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids www.tobaccofreekids.org.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine