

Victories, baby steps for public health

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For most of its history, the Nevada legislature has not exactly been a friend to public health. In the best of times, lawmakers have never adequately funded essential public health services – we typically rank among the bottom tier of states in terms of per capita expenditures on public health and to this day remain heavily dependent on federal public health dollars.

In lean times, lawmakers have added insult to injury by shortchanging public health in the name of fiscal prudence. Since the onset of the Great Recession in 2007, for instance, lawmakers have diverted tens of millions of tobacco settlement dollars – a key source of revenue for tobacco cessation and prevention – to the general fund each year just to plug state budget holes.

It is thus noteworthy that the 2015 legislative session produced multiple wins for public health and, hopefully, marks a turning point for state public health policy in Nevada.

First and foremost, the legislature approved revenue measures for major investments in K-12 education that put education funding on a more solid footing. A better educated Nevada is not only critical for generating higher paying jobs and improving economic productivity in our state, education is important for improving health in ways that will translate into lower spending on medical care. Educational attainment remains the strongest predictor of adult health and life expectancy.

Senate Bill 483 – a cornerstone budget measure recently signed into law by Governor Sandavol last week will provide \$1.1 billion in additional funding over the next biennium – includes an increase in the cigarette tax by \$1, from 80 cents per pack to \$1.80 per pack. This landmark legislation will not only generate much needed state revenue, it will deter use tobacco use and prevent potential new smokers from starting a highly addictive, not to mention costly, habit in the first place.

Public health wins also include \$27 million for the new medical school in Las Vegas, support for statewide medical residency and fellowship programs, and enhanced Medicaid reimbursement for inpatient and mental health services. The legislature also ratified and approved interstate compacts dealing with medical licensure and mental health.

None of these measures will solve our state's chronic health workforce deficits overnight. However, they signal a legislature that is finally beginning to direct significant dollars to health care education.

The legislature also took positive baby steps by approving new statutory language on the provision and reimbursement of telehealth technology, the development of community paramedicine services and community health workers, and the movement of more Nevadans into cost-effective, patient-centered medical homes.

Finally, public health wins include fending off awful legislation that failed to meet legislative deadlines, most notably “emergency” campus carry gun that was anything but an emergency and parental notification legislation that died in the final hours of this year’s legislative session.

There has been more than a bit of hyperbole about the historic nature of this year’s legislative session. In some respects, lawmakers are finally catching up to the fact that we’ve entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nonetheless, policymakers’ long-overdue attention in 2015 to the state’s economic and educational health also represent important wins for public health.

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