

Study: New Jersey Ranks Last in Funding Anti-Smoking Programs

12-10-13 By David Cruz, *Correspondent*

States across the country have shared money from the 1998 tobacco settlement and were supposed to use that money to fund smoking cessation programs, but a new study by a coalition of public health organizations finds that New Jersey ranks dead last when it comes to funding these programs.

“This year New Jersey will get around \$947 million from the tobacco settlement and tobacco taxes, but New Jersey will spend none of this on programs to stop kids from smoking,” said Vince Willmore, a spokesman for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. “New Jersey is the only state that is spending no tobacco money and no tobacco settlement money to fight tobacco use.”

In fact, the report finds, New Jersey has spent zero dollars on these programs for the past two fiscal years. We reached out to the state’s health commissioner and the governor’s office to find out why but got no response from either. But the fact is there isn’t much settlement money left for New Jersey, according to Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of NJ GASP, an anti-smoking policy group.

“The money was securitized under the McGreevey administration,” she noted. “Securitized is like going to a pawn shop and we got about 10 cents on the dollar for every dollar that we were supposed to get under the Master Settlement Agreement, so the money was used at that time to close some major budgetary needs.”

But, says Blumenfeld, to the long-term detriment of funding for anti-smoking programs, which we all pay for in ballooning health care costs down the line. New Jersey’s not the only state to securitize its

tobacco money. About half the states in the settlement have taken that deal. But Blumentfeld says there is money out there to fund these programs.

“There is almost a billion dollars worth of revenue taken in by taxation of tobacco products in the state and just a small percentage of that, even 1 percent would be able to fund programming that’s helpful,” she said.

Willmore says New Jersey actually has made a lot of progress with high tobacco taxes and a strong smoke-free law, “but what we’re worried about is that this progress will reverse unless New Jersey also invests in tobacco prevention programs.”

New Jersey actually has some of the lowest rate of teen smokers in the country, but tobacco companies have responded to this by creating new products like so-called smokeless tobacco and e-cigarettes. Studies show these products appeal to young people, which makes funding these smoking cessation programs so critical.

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