



N.J.'s tobacco control report card: Flunking, and getting worse

Tim Darragh | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com (New Jersey Star-Ledger)
tdarragh@njadvancemedia.com

January 21, 2015 at 11:33 AM, updated January 21, 2015 at 2:39 PM

New Jersey's 2015 report card for its public efforts to control tobacco found the state taking a bad situation and making it worse.

The American Lung Association dropped New Jersey's grades in this year's **State of Tobacco Control report** by turning a B grade from 2014 into a D. That goes along with an A and two Fs.

"This is just really unacceptable," said Deborah Brown, president and CEO of the association's Mid-Atlantic region. "We are putting our youth at risk."

The report card is a state-by-state assessment that evaluates tobacco control policies at the federal and state level, with grades based on the strength of laws designed to protect residents from the toll of tobacco.

It's well known that New Jersey gets nearly \$1 billion from tobacco taxes and the Master Settlement Agreement that most states signed with the major tobacco companies years ago — and yet spends none of it for tobacco prevention and cessation efforts.

That failure to fund programs is one of the state's F grades carried over from previous years. The state can't go below zero dollars, so that puts New Jersey "at the very bottom," Brown said.

If New Jersey were to follow the tobacco prevention and cessation spending level **recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**, the state would allocate \$103 million every year for such programs.

Where the Garden State fell compared to 2014 is in tobacco taxes, the association found.

For 2015, the association wants to see the tax on other tobacco products such as smokeless tobacco and cigars, as well as electronic cigarettes, made equal to cigarette taxes. Cigarette taxes now are \$2.70 per pack in New Jersey.

According to Brown, the existing 75 cent tax on snuff and the 30 percent wholesale tax on other tobacco products provides less revenue than if the taxes were equalized, earning New Jersey a D grade.

There was some hope for the association. Legislators introduced a bill last year to increase the tax on other tobacco products and e-cigarettes. The bill, which would have provided \$11 million for cessation programs and \$11 million for other health programs, never got out of committee, the report said.

State Sen. Joseph Vitale said he is ready to give the bill another shot this year.

First, he said, e-cigarettes should be taxed. "For the purpose of taxation, they should be treated the same way as cigarettes," Vitale said. "We're going to get some movement again."

The other flunking grade came from the barriers to smoking cessation services that New Jersey regulations set in front of some residents. The association said the state's Medicaid program limits the duration of cessation programs, places limits on quit attempts, and requires re-authorization or co-pays. In addition, it said, the state employee health plan also sets duration limits and requires co-pays for medication.

New Jersey's lone passing grade came from its smoke-free policies that ban smoking in enclosed workplaces. However, even those could be strengthened, Brown said. Casinos still permit smoking on 25 percent of the gaming floor, exposing workers to second-hand smoke, she said.

Smoking cessation programs become even more important as health insurance costs become an ever-larger part of families' spending, she said. Cessation programs may be offered at health care institutions, she said, but they may vary in depth and may limit who may be enrolled.

While New Jersey's public anti-smoking efforts are poor in the association's view, few states do well. Only Maine and Vermont got all passing grades, Brown said, while Alaska and North Dakota were the only states that allocate the CDC-recommended funding on prevention and cessation programs.

The federal government also came up short, the association said. It failed to finalize a proposal to put all tobacco products and e-cigarettes under the jurisdiction of the Food and Drug Administration. Congress also took no action on the Obama administration's proposal to increase tobacco taxes, it noted.

According to the association, tobacco use kills almost half a million Americans and causes up to \$333 billion in health care costs and lost productivity each year. In New Jersey, the association estimates that 11,200 residents 35 and older die every year from smoking-related causes.