

Policy Options for Addressing Issues of Youth and Tobacco

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The article by Malek, Hopkins, Molloy, and Mc Gloin, on “Putting What We Know Into Practice,” focuses on the incidence of teen smoking in North Carolina as compared with other states. The authors indicate that tobacco use among the young is higher in North Carolina than the national average and that, among youth of low socioeconomic status, the risk of long-term chronic illnesses related to tobacco is greater in this state than the national average. While the national averages for the prevalence of youth smoking have continued to decline, North Carolina’s has not. According to the authors, smoking programs initiated in several states have been successful in stemming new starts and supporting those who want to quit. What do these various programs mean for North Carolina’s youth?

Excise Tax

The problem in North Carolina is particularly complex considering the role of tobacco as its long-time major economic resource. Farmers and employees of the tobacco industry rely heavily on tobacco sales for their livelihood. Clearly, however, an excise tax could lower the rate of smoking, (especially among our youth), reduce the number of those initiating the habit, as well as increase funds to the state’s coffers. The juxtaposition of reducing tobacco usage and increasing the excise tax is a fundamental issue for legislators in the state. Policy-makers must be responsible and accountable on these issues.

They cannot ignore the research or data presented by the authors that support the positive and substantial gains to be

made in reducing tobacco consumption among youth and all populations in North Carolina through the use of a tax. Likewise, policy makers cannot ignore the critical budget crisis facing the state and the need for new revenue streams. Therefore, preserving the health of our youth, stabilizing the financial base, and providing for the needs of North Carolina citizens is a two-fold responsibility law makers must assume.

Malek et al. mention that there is public support (69.6%) for an increase in the excise tax of “25 cents to more than \$1.00” to help lower the incidence of smoking among teens. How much or how little tax (and, to some lawmakers, whether a tax should be imposed at all) has generated much debate in the General Assembly. Various increases from twenty-five cents to a dollar would yield different revenue levels, all of which would be helpful in the budget crisis. Revenues generated should be clearly designated for a specific use.

Master Settlement Agreement

As a result of the Master Settlement Agreement, North Carolina has been the beneficiary of \$142 million in 2001 to address the needs of its citizens. In an attempt to balance the distribution of these dollars and to support all of its citizens through various initiatives and interests, separate funding pots were established by the legislature.

As the possibility of taxes is considered, we need to highlight the fact that from a broad perspective 75% of the total funds from the settlement have been earmarked for tobacco—that is, targeting tobacco-growing communities,

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farmers and workers. A 25% allocation has been designated "to help farmers, quota holders, warehouse workers, and others in the state," and another 50% has been allocated to the Golden Leaf Foundation for community economic development initiatives in tobacco-dependent communities.

In the interest of public health, and most especially during the budget crisis, the legislature must be aggressive in protecting the 25% allocation to the Health and Wellness Trust Fund and should use these dollars appropriately to address tobacco-related health issues among the young. Doing so reduces the overall health problems and deaths related to tobacco use and could also reduce the state's overall health costs attributed to tobacco related illnesses.

While it would be beneficial to apply some of these dollars to support youth smoking cessation, they should be used to support a mass media campaign. The authors strongly recommend a series of intervention programs in conjunction with other cessation tools. Research indicates that graphic illustrations can be quite instructive in reducing the risk of smoking in teens. A media campaign can also tell youth where they can receive the necessary support to quit smoking. The Golden Leaf Foundation could assist in establishing programs using some of their 50% allocation (approximately \$71 million) for communities where large numbers of teens are smokers. Media campaigns, already under way on local radio stations, are particularly fruitful in promoting smoking cessation among youth. Graphic media targeting middle and high schools could be increased to bombard teens with the seriousness of the message.

Given the public attitude and the general tone regarding public health, the General Assembly should revisit existing preemptive legislation. Legislators could repeal the Smoking in Public Places law to prohibit smoking in all public places (including the legislature). This law would provide

smoke-free schools at all educational levels. This action would also support the initiative begun a few years ago by North Carolina students (our youngest citizens) and former Governor Hunt to ensure that smoke-free environments exist in *all* schools in *all* counties in North Carolina.

The Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission

A vote was taken to fund a three-year program to support a youth prevention and cessation program in North Carolina. These funds appear to be limited, so continued funding would be necessary to reach the ever-growing population of youth who may be at risk in the future.

The legislature should ensure that funding for youth smoking cessation programs receives priority status and should use state dollars to leverage outside resources and build partnerships with organizations like the American Legacy Foundation to establish successful outcomes in this area.

North Carolina is at a crossroad, with many challenges and opportunities for positive change. Given the fact that North Carolina youth at all levels are currently using tobacco at rates higher than youth in other states; given the broad-based support from our citizens for improved health and wellness; given that resources have been provided through the Master Settlement Agreement and current school and community-based interventions have already been established in North Carolina; and given the fact that we have the data and know what works, the legislature is in a good position to make a significant difference in the health and lives of North Carolina's youth.