

Using Master Settlement Agreement Dollars to Fund a Statewide Tobacco Cessation Quitline

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The North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission (HWTF) was established by the North Carolina General Assembly in May 2000 to receive 25% of the state's share of the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement in order to address the health needs of vulnerable and underserved populations. HWTF addresses its statutory mission by investing in programs and establishing partnerships that address critical health needs in 4 major areas: tobacco use among youth, obesity, health disparities, and access to medications. Governed by an 18-member commission of health care experts drawn from a variety of professions, the Health and Wellness Trust Fund has embarked on these 4 major initiatives, all designed to reduce the economic and human suffering from preventable diseases.

The Health and Wellness Trust Fund has awarded over 250 grants to date that build capacity in local communities to prevent and treat chronic health issues. These local grantees make up the infrastructure that has enabled each of the Health and Wellness Trust Fund's preventive initiatives to reach its overall goals. To enhance the impact of local grant infrastructure and to have a more sustainable impact statewide, HWTF also designs and implements mass media campaigns and works to affect policy change at the local and state level. University research and other expert agencies are engaged on an ongoing basis to measure and optimize the effectiveness of all these strategies.

Teen Tobacco Use Rates Have Reached Historic Lows with HWTF Efforts

Tobacco use is the number one avoidable cause of illness and death in the United States, accounting for more than 435 000 deaths each year.¹ It is also the leading cause of preventable death in North Carolina. Through its efforts over the last 5 years, the Health and Wellness Trust Fund has made significant strides in reducing the rate of teen tobacco use in North Carolina. HWTF's Youth Tobacco Use Prevention and Cessation Initiative has resulted in North Carolina's youth smoking rates reaching the lowest point ever recorded in the state's history: middle school smoking has dropped by 51.6%

to a current rate of 4.5%, and high school smoking has dropped by 30.4% to a current rate of 19%. This data translates into 34 000 fewer teen smokers in the state since 2003.² Furthermore, by fall 2008, all 115 school districts in North Carolina will be 100% tobacco free. Only 14 school districts had adopted the policy when HWTF efforts began.

Young Adult Smoking Rates Continue to be High

In spite of the progress in youth smoking rates, young adults (ages 18-24) continue to have the highest smoking prevalence of any age group in North Carolina, a fact which is also true of the rest of the nation. While the current smoking rate for all adults is 22.6%, the young adult rate is 28.2%.³ Grants awarded through HWTF's Tobacco-Free Colleges program will work to replicate the gains in youth tobacco use reduction by discouraging initiation of tobacco use and promoting cessation among our state's young adults.

Why Quitline?

Quitting tobacco is the single most important thing an individual can do to prolong his or her life. And while studies show that most tobacco users want to quit, many are unable to overcome the addiction on their own. Quitlines are telephone-based cessation services that help tobacco users quit through a variety of services including individual counseling, information, and self-help materials. Their effectiveness is well-established. In fact, studies have shown that using a quitline doubles a smoker's chances of successfully quitting as compared to other self-help methods.⁴ Advantages of quitlines as a cessation strategy include accessibility, centralization of care and resources, and cost-effectiveness. In addition, quitlines can contribute to eliminating tobacco-related disparities among some difficult to reach populations by providing tailored services and a degree of anonymity to callers. Quitlines can also provide multilingual services that may be unavailable or unfeasible at the community level.

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Launching QuitlineNC

The Health and Wellness Trust Fund worked with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch and with other partners to launch the state's first ever tobacco use quitline in November 2005. QuitlineNC (1-800-QUIT-NOW) provides proactive cessation information and support in English, Spanish, and a multitude of other languages. The service is delivered by trained 'quit coaches' who provide up to 4 callbacks to quitline users to check on progress and to provide additional guidance. Callers may request information about quitting for themselves, a friend, or a family member. QuitlineNC services are available free-of-charge, 7 days a week from 8:00 am until midnight. HWTF funds QuitlineNC services to assist teens and young adults to quit tobacco use as well as to the primary caregivers of those under 18 and teachers in public and private schools statewide. HWTF has allocated nearly \$2 million annually for promoting QuitlineNC and for providing services.

Promoting QuitlineNC to Young Adults Results in Tremendous Increase in Use of Service

In fall 2007, HWTF launched the mass media campaign *Call it Quits* to promote the Quitline to young adults through television, radio, social networking sites, and a Web site (www.quitlinenc.com). This campaign was based on formative research specifically conducted for this demographic by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Public Health. During the 4 months that the campaign was running, 745 young adult smokers registered for the free phone service to create their own plan for quitting tobacco. This represents a monthly average of 186 young adult registrants compared to a monthly average of only 34 during the 6 months preceding the campaign—nearly a 6-fold increase in registrations from 18- to 24-year olds.

HWTF Encourages Health Care Providers to Reach Out to Tobacco Users

Strong evidence indicates that physicians increase their patients' smoking cessation rates by routinely identifying smoking status and providing smokers with advice, assistance, and referrals to help them quit. The recently released Clinical Practice Guidelines for Treating Tobacco Use and Dependence⁵ strongly recommends

that clinicians integrate tobacco use screening and assistance into their health care practice. Providers have a significant impact on a patient's tobacco use. Although clinicians may not be able to provide extended counseling in the office setting, they can refer patients to counseling support through the quitline. Research indicates that physician referral to smoking cessation counseling, such as a quitline, is associated with a significantly higher participation rate than simply telling patients they should quit smoking.

In the spring of 2008, HWTF focused its outreach on a statewide effort to educate health care providers about QuitlineNC and began encouraging them to utilize the innovative fax-referral service. The fax-referral service allows health care providers and HWTF's local tobacco grantees to fax an interested tobacco user's contact information directly to the QuitlineNC, where an expert 'quit coach' will make the initial contact with the tobacco user. Once this connection has been made, the tobacco user will receive information and support services. Through partnership with professional societies and organizations, over 10 000 North Carolina physicians were provided with:

- An "Ask, Assist, Refer" help card with scripted prompts for physicians to use in working with patients who smoke.
- A "prescription pad" urging smokers to call QuitlineNC for help in quitting.
- A fax referral pad for health care providers to make initial QuitlineNC contacts.

Since its inception over 2 years ago, QuitlineNC has served over 12 000 North Carolinians. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended goal for a state tobacco use quitline is at least 2% of the total state population annually, which would be over 177 000 callers (30 times the current number of callers on an annual basis). HWTF and DHHS would like to offer QuitlineNC services to a much larger pool of North Carolina residents that are ready to quit using tobacco but have been limited by funding constraints.

Two million people in North Carolina are still smoking.³ As long as this is the case, HWTF will continue towards its goal of institutionalizing the Quitline as a frontline tobacco cessation resource in our state. By providing ongoing funding for services and promotion, trying to secure additional funding, creating sustainable partnerships with the health care system for referrals, and targeting programming to reach high-risk populations, HWTF's ultimate goal is to reduce tobacco use among all North Carolinians.

REFERENCES

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