

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Pennsylvania smoking cessation programs at risk in propose budget

By Brad Bumsted
STATE CAPITOL REPORTER
Friday, September 25, 2009

HARRISBURG — Julie Vojtash started smoking when she was 12, and she's on the way to kicking the habit.

Vojtash, 18, of Brookline is enrolled in a smoking cessation program at Magee-Womens Hospital. With the help of a nicotine patch, she hasn't smoked a cigarette in a month.

"I didn't want to quit until I joined the program," she said.

Such smoking cessation and prevention programs are in jeopardy because of a 50 percent cut proposed in a state budget agreement. The proposal would raise the state tax on cigarettes by 25 cents a pack, but keep Pennsylvania as the only state that doesn't levy an excise tax on smokeless and chewing tobacco, and one of two states that doesn't impose a special state tax on cigars.

To Brian Primack, an assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine, the state's policy on tobacco taxes and health care is worthy of satire and a spot on the Web-based newspaper spoof, "The Onion."

"Pennsylvania doesn't tax chewing tobacco, but it taxes zoos and the Children's Museum? It's a joke," said Primack, who is vice president of the Greater Pittsburgh Unit of the American Cancer Society.

The proposed 2009-10 budget agreement would impose the 6 percent sales tax on theater, dance, music and museums admissions; the tax is 7 percent in Allegheny County. The agreement would cut smoking cessation and prevention programs from \$32 million to \$16 million. Cigars and snuff, targeted for a state excise tax under Gov. Ed Rendell's February budget, escaped any new tax.

The \$16 million taken from tobacco cessation programs will go to the state's General Fund to help balance the budget.

"I'm not sure who this benefits, except big tobacco," Primack said.

Lawmakers for decades were loathe to tax other products because tobacco is

grown in Southeastern Pennsylvania, and several cigar manufacturers and large retailers are housed here.

"We do have a cigar-friendly Legislature," said Stephanie Land, a University of Pittsburgh researcher who serves as secretary of the Greater Pittsburgh Unit of the American Cancer Society.

Erik Arneson, a spokesman for Senate Republicans, said the proposed increase on cigarettes and a new tax proposed on "little cigars," cigarettes made with cigar or pipe tobacco, will help reduce consumption.

"Data available from previous years indicates that increasing the tax on cigarettes reduces overall cigarette use," he said.

Lauren Patrick and her husband, David, own the small John Hay Cigar company near Coatsville in Chester County. She said their business is reeling from a new federal tax that went into effect April 1 and increased the cost of cigars 30 cents to 40 cents per cigar.

"The idea of another tax on top of it would probably put us out of business," she said.

Anti-tobacco groups say the proposed cut in smoking cessation programs is unsound public policy.

Frank Leone, an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine who runs a stop-smoking clinic, said cutting back on cessation programs will mean that fewer people quit — and that leads to higher health care costs.

Said Leone: "I feel like legislators are throwing smokers under the bus."

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