New Report: Tobacco-Related Health Problems Costing Wisconsin More than Ever

Cost reaches $528 for every man, woman and child in the state

Madison, Wis., January 12, 2015—The 2015 Burden of Tobacco Report released today by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, shows Wisconsin is losing billions of dollars to tobacco-related health care costs and lost worker productivity. The report estimates smoking costs Wisconsin $4.6 billion annually; including $3 billion in health care costs and an additional $1.6 billion in lost productivity. Tobacco use is also responsible for nearly 7,000 deaths in Wisconsin and is the cause of 80 percent of all lung cancer deaths and 14 percent of all heart attacks in the state.

The report comes as lawmakers return to Madison and begin work on the state’s biennial budget. Currently Wisconsin spends $5.3 million on its tobacco cessation and prevention program—just 9% of what the Centers for Disease Control recommends. The state collects an estimated $756 million annually in tobacco revenue.

“Reducing tobacco use is a must for our state’s physical and fiscal health,” said Sara Sahli, Wisconsin government relations director for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN). “Right now tobacco is costing every man, woman and child in our state $528 annually. That’s money that could be spent elsewhere and suffering that could be avoided if we could kick or tobacco habit.”

Sahli says the state’s cessation and prevention program has seen tremendous success and is a proven investment. Just last month two reports issued found the state’s youth and adult smoking rates at all-time lows; just 18 percent of adults and 10 percent of high school teens now smoke. Yet this good news was tempered by data showing a dramatic jump in teen use of smokeless tobacco products and electronic cigarettes.

Public health advocates attribute that jump to a number of things including a large disparity in how tobacco products other than cigarettes are taxed. “Little cigars” for instance, are cigarettes wrapped in
brown paper, yet the per-pack tax can be as low as 65 cents compared to the $2.52 per pack tax on regular cigarettes.

“The state Legislature could easily help reverse this trend by making sure all tobacco products, including little cigars, are taxed at the same rate as cigarettes” said Chris Klein, Wisconsin government relations director for the American Heart Association. “There is strong scientific evidence that high tobacco taxes are one of the most effective means to reduce tobacco use, especially among kids.”

“An investment in prevention today means dollars and lives saved tomorrow,” added Dona Wininsky, with the American Lung Association in Wisconsin. “We are reaping the rewards of previous investments in tobacco cessation and prevention, but we need to continue to make this a priority. Tobacco companies are targeting new customers—almost always teenagers—with new and evolving smokeless products and increasingly electronic cigarettes.”

The same Wisconsin survey that found record low teen smoking rates also found the rate of Wisconsin teens using e-cigarettes is 75 percent higher than the national average.

The full health effects of electronic cigarettes remain unclear, but the Surgeon General has found that the nicotine in e-cigarettes is addictive and can damage developing teenage brains.

“The tobacco industry is aggressively marketing e-cigarettes to teens and young adults,” said Wininsky. “Bubble gum, candy apple and cotton candy are just some of the kid-friendly e-cigarette flavors. Obviously these products are being pushed on kids and are not just another way for adults to quit smoking,” said Wininsky.

The Food and Drug Administration has proposed regulating electronic cigarettes like other tobacco products, but has yet to issue a final rule.

The Burden of Tobacco Report was prepared by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Initiatives and Research.

View the full report at https://www4.uwm.edu/cuir/