



My Turn: Tobacco funds used inappropriately

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The article, "Ideas for fortifying Vermont workforce praised," (Free Press, Dec. 17) said that the Next Generation Commission's report on work force development and education scholarships "won a mostly positive response." The story, however, ignored the commission's proposal to use \$2 million a year from Vermont's tobacco settlement funds to pay for health care workers' education loan repayment.

The Coalition for a Tobacco Free Vermont, which includes Vermont's chapters of the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and the American Lung Association, doesn't oppose loan repayment but does think it is inappropriate to pay for it from tobacco settlement funds.

The tobacco settlement funds were awarded as compensation for damages caused by the tobacco industry to Vermont smokers. Thus, the coalition believes it is only right to use it to first fully fund Vermont's tobacco prevention and control programs before using it in other areas.

In fact, most Vermonters think the same thing. In a survey conducted earlier this year, an overwhelming majority of those polled -- and many smokers -- said most of the tobacco settlement funds should be spent on tobacco control and prevention programs.

Given that half of Vermont's smokers will die from a tobacco-related disease if they don't stop, for thousands of Vermonters the failure to fully fund tobacco control and prevention is truly a life-or-death issue.

Many uses for tobacco settlement funds have been proposed, including substance-abuse programs, Medicaid, and college scholarships (and each of these uses some convoluted logic to say that these programs will influence smoking). However, in its first five years the Vermont Tobacco Control Program has never been fully funded, or reached the minimum amount recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. Plus, Vermont has not set aside the recommended amount in the trust fund to sustain tobacco control efforts after these settlement dollars evaporate.

We fail to see the logic in underfunding tobacco control to pay for these other programs. The result of this underfunding is starting to show. Although Vermont's Tobacco Control Program

has dramatically decreased smoking by Vermont youths (down from 38 percent to 16 percent), the program has been much less successful in getting Vermont adult smokers to stop and, thus, needs full funding to implement new programs.

In summary, the coalition believes that, until the Vermont Tobacco Control Program is fully funded for current and future efforts, using tobacco settlement monies for non-tobacco-related programs fails to respect the reason Vermont is receiving this money -- to alleviate the suffering caused by tobacco.

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