Doctors and Businesses Say Tobacco Settlement Key to Maine’s Future

Coalition of Doctors, Hospitals and other Public Health Officials Oppose Budget Proposals that Raid the Fund for a Healthy Maine

Augusta- A coalition of students, health care providers, business leaders and public health officials turned out in opposition to portions of the Governor’s proposed supplemental budget on Friday that would divert Maine’s share of tobacco settlement dollars away from its intended purpose of providing services that prevent tobacco use and the onset of chronic diseases.

“This short-sighted proposal takes Maine in the wrong direction,” said Gordon Smith, Vice President of the Maine Medical Association. “Maine people need good jobs, and every opportunity to live healthy lives. Keeping the Fund working to prevent disease and promote good health is our best opportunity to support healthy families, build a productive workforce, and lower costs for businesses and for all of us. Helping smokers quit, giving kids a healthy start, supporting new parents, helping families get active, teaching students about healthy choices, and engaging communities in every corner of Maine: each one leads to a brighter future for all of us.”

Maine business leaders consistently identify lowering health costs as the single most important priority for lawmakers to address in their efforts to spur new economic growth. Many employers see the Fund for a Healthy Maine as central to their efforts to keep their workers healthy and productive, lower their overall health costs, and improve their bottom line.

Andy Spaulding works for Viridian Health Management and helps employers bring down their health care costs by implementing cost-effective wellness programs. He told the crowd, “I hear time and time again that health care and insurance costs are preventing businesses from hiring more workers. They want to know what they can do to help make their workers more productive and to lower their own costs. Most don’t have the money to create their own wellness programs, so what they can do is link to the resources in their community. The Fund
for a Healthy Maine provides these businesses with the tools they need to have a healthy and productive workforce. Let’s face it, Maine’s economic recovery depends on bringing down the cost of health care for businesses, and that’s what the Fund for a Healthy Maine is designed to do.”

Peter Ingram owns a small real estate company in South Portland. His operation is too small to have a dedicated human resources or employees wellness program, but keeping his employees healthy is an important part of his business’s bottom line. “With help from the Fund for a Healthy Maine, we created a policy for introducing healthy foods at company meetings, increasing physical activity in and around the office, and helping one of our staff to quit smoking,” said Ingram. “Cutting health promotion programs like the Fund for a Healthy Maine will hurt small businesses like mine.”

By some estimates as much as seventy-five percent of Maine’s health care dollars are spent treating chronic diseases – most of which are preventable. Tobacco use and obesity are the largest causes of these chronic conditions.

Lisa Harvey-McPherson, President of the Maine Public Health Association and Vice President of Continuum Care at Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems in Bangor, shared results of a community health needs assessment conducted by the One-Maine Collaborative, a partnership between MaineHealth, Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems and MaineGeneral Health. They found that smoking, overweight and sedentary lifestyle are priority health issues across almost all age groups in every corner of the state and that adolescent Mainers engage in a variety of health risk behaviors that result in early onset of chronic diseases like diabetes.

“The good news is,” said Harvey-McPherson, “there is a clear cut economic benefit to acting early. The cost of treating these diseases is seven and half times higher after the fact than the investment in preventing them in the first place. Our needs assessment allows us to pinpoint exactly how and where to intervene so we can lower health costs for everyone.”

In early December, the Commission to Study the Allocations of the Fund for a Healthy Maine reported on their findings. One member of the Commission, Dr. Joel Kase, an emergency room doctor in Augusta noted his frustration in seeing patient after patient enter the doors of the ER to be treated for conditions that were easily prevented and at a much lower cost if only for an earlier intervention.

“The unanimous, bipartisan recommendations of the Commission that seek to protect the long-term health of Maine citizens’ has to be taken into account,” said Kase. “They should not be ignored for the sake of an ill-advised, shortsighted budget fix today.”
Thomas Williams, a USM student testified in support of the FHM and also read his comments at the press conference. He stated: “In 2004, I was a quiet freshman in high school who came from a family that barely made it by every month. I was always told that I couldn't make a difference, that I didn't have a voice. But then I attended a Maine Youth Action Network conference and was inspired to learn more about creating change. I'm standing here today as a proud student at the University of Southern Maine, an involved member of my community, and a valued employee of the university. If it wasn't for the Fund for a Healthy Maine, there is no way I'd be the person I am today. The Fund is about building a brighter future for all of us – don’t sell us out.”

Chris Wick, a student at Maranacook High School stated: “Adults are always telling us, Think ahead; plan for the future. What kind of message does this send when lawmakers are willing to trade in our future – a future that will cost all of them a lot less money if they prevent people from getting sick today, instead of paying for health care after it's too late? That just doesn’t make any sense at all.”

The Governor’s Proposal cuts over $29.5 million from the $54 million fund in 2013 and would all but eliminate funding for Maine’s 26 Healthy Maine Partnerships and 16 school-based health centers. Maine’s Healthy Maine Partnerships worked with 884 Employers to promote the services offered through the Maine Tobacco Helpline in 2010. Maine’s oral health program would be eliminated, which provided dental sealants and fluoride treatments to school children in 77 school districts and reached 23,248 children in more than 230 K-4 schools during the 2010-2011 school year. Dental pain is one of the leading causes of preventable emergency room visits in Maine. Also slated for elimination is support for family planning services, including the closure of 7 clinics across the state affecting more than 5,900 clients.

The Governor also seeks to eliminate funding for is Maine’s Home visitation program, which helps identify potential developmental delays as well as funding for Head Start. Funding would also be eliminated for Maine’s Childcare Subsidy Program, which supports day care services and afterschool programs so that parents can enter the workforce. The childcare cut will lead to 2,000 working families losing their subsidy.

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*The Friends of the Fund for a Healthy Maine is a statewide coalition of over 150 organizations dedicated to keeping the Fund working as it was intended to prevent disease and promote good health among Maine people.*