

Florida's Cigarette Tax Surcharge and Mentally Ill Individuals

By Bob Sharpe

June 29, 2009

This year, the Florida Legislature voted for a new \$1 per pack surcharge on cigarettes. On May 27, Gov. Crist signed SB 1840, authorizing the user fee increase. The surcharge is projected to raise as much as \$1 billion in new tax revenues. The proceeds from the increased tax are intended to address the extraordinary increases in health care spending in Florida and, in particular, those associated with smoking. The new revenues will be deposited in the Health Care Trust Fund administered by the Agency for Health Care Administration.

But where should the funds be spent and for whom? It has been proven that there are substantial health, economic and social costs associated with continued and heavy tobacco use by individuals with mental illnesses. The link between smoking and mental illness is undeniable. More than 75 percent of individuals affected by mental illnesses smoke, three to four times the rate of the general population, consuming 44 percent of all cigarettes consumed in the U.S. As the number of smokers decreases, in response to health concerns and negative attitudes about smoking, the smoking population is increasingly made up of those with mental illnesses who also have the greatest difficulty quitting.

Individuals with mental illnesses have higher rates of chronic health problems and premature death compared to the general population due to long-term tobacco use. Most individuals with mental illnesses, who on average have a 20-25 year shorter life span than the average American, die from smoking-related diseases. It has been estimated that 200,000 of the 435,000 annual deaths from smoking occur among patients with chronic mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders. Compared to the general population, individuals with mental illnesses have a 2.3 times higher rate of cardiovascular disease, a 3.2 times higher rate of respiratory disease, and a 3 times higher rate of lung cancer. Tobacco use among the mentally ill population is a major public health issue that needs immediate attention through focused cessation programs.

People with mental illnesses smoke for many of the same reasons as the general public but also because they are influenced by their peers and cohabitants. In addition, smoking serves as a normalizing behavior for them, they have few non-smoking social supports, they believe smoking helps with the symptoms of mental illness and serves as a coping mechanism. Individuals with mental illnesses trying to quit feel excluded from mainstream cessation programs or don't have access to programs tailored to meet their needs, have lower quit rates and have higher relapse rates.

Most years, because of revenue shortfalls or other budget priorities, mental health receives very little new funding and often faces budget cutbacks. As currently structured, the state's community mental health programs must beg for renewed funding each year. And when they do, they are competing with every other public service for funding. For decades, funding for Florida's public mental health system has been uncertain, and, currently, Florida ranks 48th in per capita spending on mental health care.

It is imperative that a dedicated funding source be established to increase funding for community mental health services. In the long-run, increased investments will pay for themselves in reduced law enforcement, correctional, juvenile justice, educational, child welfare and health care costs. Since individuals with mental illnesses will ultimately pay 44 percent of the new tobacco surcharge, the funds collected should be considered as a potential source of ongoing revenue to finance community mental health programs. It seems obvious that there should be some relationship

between a user tax and the distribution of its proceeds. Therefore, the Governor and Legislature are strongly urged to set aside a portion of the proceeds from the surcharge for mental health programs.

New funding would provide a stable source of support for programs vital to public health and safety and result in savings in other systems of care. Ultimately, the expansion of community-based programs and services will lead to improved performance and treatment outcomes for Floridians with mental illnesses. Even the slightest sum can make a difference in a patient's life, including new programs to reduce the rate of smoking among the mentally ill population.

#

Bob Sharpe is the president of the Florida Council for Community Mental Health, based in Tallahassee. He can be reached at BobSharpe@fccmh.org.