

## House Republican Press Release

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### THE MISUSE OF OUR TOBACCO SETTLEMENT FUNDS



#### *An Op-Ed by State Rep. David Scribner*

Recent news reports noted that Connecticut holds the dubious distinction of ranking at the bottom of the 50 states in spending funds from the national tobacco settlement fund on cessation and prevention programs. The state has received more than \$1 billion to date from

its share of the 1998 settlement and the recent latest ranking drops us from 36<sup>th</sup> to dead last.

This is a situation that must not be allowed to stand.

A primary purpose of the tobacco settlement was to prevent future tobacco use. It was left to individual states to determine how they should best utilize their share of the settlement. Sadly, Connecticut has dwelled near the bottom of rankings of use for prevention and cessation programs since funds from the settlement were first delivered nearly a decade ago.

In prior years, the Legislature's commitment has been lackluster in what is a very important issue to the future of our children and our state. These settlement funds are not set aside for any specific account. The Legislature has opted to simply use this money to bridge budget shortfalls for the majority of years it has been received, using only 1.15 percent toward cessation and prevention programs.

Using the settlement funds as a 'gift' for increasing spending in various other areas and not properly developing cessation and prevention programs is extremely poor public policy. Reducing tobacco use in our society helps lower the cost of health care for all and is a goal every state government should work toward. Millions and millions of dollars that could have been used for this purpose in Connecticut (more than \$100 million annually) is now long gone.

One should be aware that there have been efforts to utilize these funds for their original purpose. As a member of the Legislature's Public Health Committee, I introduced legislation in 2007 to spend substantially more of the tobacco settlement for tobacco education programs to discourage smoking among students in grades one through eight. The original language in this legislation designated \$3 million for this purpose and funds would have been available to every elementary school in the state.

Health experts note that preventing young children from ever using tobacco is one of our best bets to reduce use. We must reach them before they start smoking and they are starting earlier than many people are aware. I have spoken with a number of groups about this subject and discussed how prevention programs could reach elementary school students with the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS).

Health experts note that while tobacco use results in significant health consequences, one should be aware nicotine is more immediately addictive than nearly all other drugs, and that it is associated with drug and alcohol abuse and/or mental illness -- the treatments for which are costly and long-term. The total potential savings from preventing tobacco initiation and treating nicotine dependence, therefore, are substantial in the long term.

A second version of legislation I introduced and was nearly unanimously approved by the General Assembly did not contain a specific amount to be designated for the tobacco education programs, instead noting that the funding would be done within available appropriations. During subsequent negotiations between legislative leaders and the Office of Policy and Management, the original \$3 million sum was reduced to \$300,000.

It is disturbing to know that the state chose not to part with \$3 million out of more than \$140 million for the original purpose of the tobacco settlement and that devoting a significant amount of funds for this program was also overwhelmingly supported by the Legislature.

The state must make a genuine commitment to spend a significant amount of tobacco settlement funds for prevention programs, not merely pay this issue lip service, which happened in 2007. I will introduce legislation to make that commitment at the February start of the 2008 legislative session.