

Parents fight uphill battle against vaping and tobacco

Michigan dead last in the nation for funding prevention programs

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Michigan is big on protecting its trees, lakes and forests.

However, when it comes to programs that prevent kids from using tobacco products and helping tobacco users quit, little attention or funding is given.

“You have to have a license to sell Christmas trees but not tobacco products,” said Dr. Brittany Taylor, internist and pediatrician at Hurley Medical Center, assistant professor at the Pediatric Public Health Initiative at Michigan State University and co-chair of Keep MI Kids Tobacco Free Alliance, following the release of a new report showing how much funding each state provides for tobacco prevention programs and regulations.

Michigan ranks dead last along with West Virginia.

According to the report released by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Heart Association, American Lung Association, Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights and Truth Initiative the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that Michigan allocate \$110.6 million each year to fully protect residents.

In contrast the state allocates \$1.8 million.

That's 1.6% of what's recommended by the CDC.

"We urge lawmakers to prioritize the health of Michiganders by investing in tobacco prevention programs," Tayler said. "This is not an area where Michigan should be last in the country. We hope this last-place ranking is a wake-up call for the need for a comprehensive policy solution in our state."

The numbers

The report shows Maine is the only state to fully fund the tobacco prevention and cessation programs at levels recommended by the CDC. Eight states provide at least 50% of the CDC's recommended funding, while 31 states and the District of Columbia are spending less than a quarter of the CDC recommendation.

The data for annual state funding amounts recommended by the CDC according to population show the top five states to be:

1. Maine, which is funding \$15.9 million as recommended by the CDC.
2. Utah: \$15.4 million
3. Oklahoma: \$32.6 million
4. Delaware: \$9.7 million
5. Oregon: \$28.8 million

The top five states spending the least amount of money on prevention programs in addition to Michigan include:

1. West Virginia: \$451,000
2. Georgia: \$2.1 million
3. Texas: \$6 million
4. Alabama: \$1.7 million
5. Nevada: \$950,000

Further findings in the report show tobacco companies spend nearly \$12 to market tobacco products for every \$1 states invest to reduce tobacco use. According to the most recent data from the Federal Trade Commission (for 2022), the major tobacco companies spend \$8.6 billion a year – nearly \$1 million per hour – to market cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products in the U.S. In Michigan, the tobacco industry spends over \$300 million each year to lure the next generation of tobacco users into a lifetime of addiction.

New wave of users

Once evidence showed that smoking causes health problems such as lung or heart disease and cancer, health care professionals worked to turn the tide of Americans taking up the habit.

“It only took 50 years to do that and we did OK,” Tayler said.

Efforts by health care advocates were further backed by the Surgeon General’s report released in 1964 warning of the health hazards.

“Over the past five decades, scientists, researchers and policy makers have determined what works, and what steps must be taken if we truly want to bring to a close one of our nation’s most tragic battles – one that has killed ten times the number of Americans who died in all of our nation’s wars combined,” according to the Surgeon General’s report, “The Health Consequences of Smoking – 50 Years of Progress.”

The efforts cut smoking rates in half and changed Americans collective view of smoking from an accepted national pastime to a discouraged threat to individual and public health.



Jennifer Jackson, a social worker and mother of four talks about the struggles that her son has had since he started vaping at the age of 14. (Photo courtesy of Jennifer Jackson)

The strong policies that were put in place have largely driven cigarette smoking out of public view and public air space. Thanks to smoke free laws, smoking is no longer allowed on airplanes or in a growing number of restaurants, bars, college campuses and government buildings.

Tayler said public health did an awesome job reversing the trend of adults smoking tobacco but now we're seeing another trend.

The report by the Alliance and others showed the latest government survey results show 2.8 million U.S. middle and high school students reported current (past 30 days) use of any tobacco product in 2023, including 2.1 million who used e-cigarettes. Flavors play a key role in youth use, with 89% of youth e-cigarette users and 87% of youth who use any tobacco product reporting that they used flavored products.

The number of kids smoking in 2010 was 2%.

Since then the rate of adolescents using tobacco products such as e-cigarettes has reached between 10 and 20%.

"Now it's even cigars and hookah," Tayler said, hookah being a multi-stemmed instrument for heating or vaporizing and smoking flavored tobacco. It can also be used for vaping cannabis, hashish or opium.

"It's definitely a topic that's a great concern for public health," said Macomb County Health and Community Services Director Andrew Cox of the amount of young people using tobacco products.

"We need to educate them on what can happen," Cox said. "Anything we can do in terms of early intervention means better outcomes for our young residents."

Cox said schools are doing what they can to enforce policies against tobacco use but they're not really effective.

If anyone can attest to that it's Jennifer Jackson of Macomb Township.

She's a social worker and mother of four children. Her middle son who is 17 and a junior in high school has been expelled more than once since he started vaping at the age of 14.

"He just doesn't care," said Jackson, who has tried every means possible currently available to parents in order to get him to stop.

He's also smoking pot.

"I know I'm not the only parent in this situation," said Jackson, whose struggles with her son began during the pandemic when everyone was stuck at home.

"He went for a walk," Jackson said, so she went for a ride on her bike and found her son on the side of the road vaping.

"He said he saw another kid throw it on the ground and picked it up," Jackson said. "He said, 'He was curious and bored.'"

Being he was the kind of kid who never lied, always respectful, the kind of kid who holds the door open for the elderly, she had a talk with him about the dangers of vaping and let it go at that.

"I thought he was just trying to fit in with his peers," Jackson said, until it escalated to the point where she caught him outside wearing a headlamp, digging to find the vape that she took away and threw in the trash. "He was so desperate to get his hands on it."

Since then, he's been caught in school vaping, expelled, gone to court several times, attended intensive outpatient therapy and was even hospitalized. Jackson and her husband, Steven, have also joined him in family sessions with a therapist and while they thought he stopped vaping and was doing better, they learned he was just using more marijuana.

"He would come home high," Jackson said, and when they tried to take it away he would become frustrated and angry to the point where police had to intervene.

Even after taking it away he would just find another supplier, on the street, in a park, bathroom at school, one time he even used DoorDash.

"My younger son said it's everywhere," she said.

Treatment and prevention

Amanda Holm, senior project manager for Henry Ford Health's teen tobacco treatment services has been working in the field for 20 years. She said vaping has become the new epidemic among teens.

“The trend now is a 3-1 ratio for the number of teens who do vaping as opposed to cigarettes.”

The free referral program provides resources to help young people (ages 14-17 years old) recover from addiction to tobacco, nicotine or other vaping-related products. Teens can enroll in the program themselves, or be referred by their pediatrician, parent, athletic trainer or through their school.

“We are focused on treatment,” Holm said of the evidence-based program that’s had patients as young as third and fourth-grade.

Although effective, Holm agrees with other health care experts that prevention is key.

“Have a conversation with your children,” she said. “Bring it up in a way that suggests you’re open to talking about it, not judgmental. Ask them what they are seeing? What do they think when they see a friend vaping and do they know what it can do to them?”

Parents can also educate themselves. Watch for signs like mood swings, irritability and excessive thirst.

One source of additional revenues that could be dedicated to tobacco prevention programs is the more than \$1.1 billion in recent legal settlements with Juul for its deceptive marketing practices and its role in the youth e-cigarette epidemic. To fully undo the harm caused by Juul, states should be using this money for youth prevention efforts.

Advocates for change like the Keep MI Kids Tobacco Free Alliance are also urging policymakers to advance a comprehensive tobacco prevention legislative package (Senate Bills 647-654) introduced in November in the Michigan Senate.



Jennifer Jackson displays a handful of vaping products used by her teenage son. (Photo courtesy of Jennifer Jackson)

Senate Bill 648, for example, sponsored by Sen. Stephanie Chang, a Detroit Democrat whose district includes south Warren, would tax e-cigarettes and vaping products in Michigan for the first time and increase tobacco taxes with proceeds dedicated to efforts to reduce tobacco use among youth. Other components include ending the sale of flavored tobacco products, requiring tobacco retailers to have a license, and restoring local control empowering cities to pass stronger tobacco prevention measures if they so choose.

“It’s unacceptable that Michigan is dead last in funding tobacco prevention programs,” said Jodi Radke, regional director for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and co-chair for the Alliance. “The time is long overdue for policymakers to right this wrong, invest in lifesaving programs, and pass the historic bill package aimed at protecting Michigan kids from vaping and tobacco addiction.”

Jackson doesn’t know when her son will stop.

“We’ve tried everything,” said Jackson, who joined the Keep MI Kids Tobacco Free Alliance for resources and support. “We have hope — he’ll find the passion to change his way of life for the better. But he needs to make the choice to do that.”