

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Working hard to make smoking history

The habit of smoking carries different kinds of costs. There are financial costs - a 25-cent-per-pack increase in Massachusetts this year after voters approved last November's ballot Question 1. And there are health costs, which will be more widely understood as a result of all the quarters that are collected by the state.

October has been the month for several press conferences announcing distribution of the new tax monies. The money is reaching to all comers of the state to fund initiatives to reduce cigarette smoking in Massachusetts. It has been my privilege to attend several of these conferences.

“Starting today, we are making smoking history” is the double-meaning slogan that introduced the program. The \$90 million campaign is the most expensive and intensive effort in the nation's history. It provides education to discourage youngsters from smoking, support for smokers who want to quit and a media campaign to carry both messages. At a Boston press conference on Oct. 4, I congratulated the staff at Stop Teenage Addiction to Tobacco (STAT), a national Springfield-based organization, on their grant of \$800,000 to develop tobacco-control education and training projects. The education thrust is based on the knowledge that smokers are more addicted if they develop the habit as youngsters.

A second grant was announced to support a new “smokers-quit line,” a toll-free number that will be available throughout the state. The state acknowledges with this grant that it is not easy for anyone to break a smoking habit. But if you want to quit, the state has trained personnel to support you. The third segment of the program, media advertising, was launched that same October day. You may have seen examples of the new advertising campaign which is now on radio and television and in newspapers.

In the days after the large statewide grants were awarded, David Mulligan, Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health, undertook a tour of the state to award neighborhood stipends. Springfield was the site of such a ceremony last Friday.

Mulligan singled out our town of Longmeadow and praised its action as one of the first communities to ban cigarette vending machines. Then Beverly Hirschhorn, Chairman of the Board of Health, accepted a \$20,000 grant to enhance our anti-smoking initiatives. Many other awards went to grass-roots entities working with young urban minority teens. The money will help to counter cigarette advertising that often targets those youngsters who are most harmed by the addiction.

Throughout the press conferences speakers often acknowledged that like many of us they are former smokers. They know that quitting is not easy. But they are working hard today in Massachusetts to make smoking history!