

HEALTH CARE

Use tobacco money to help mothers quit

By Deborah Kersting

Two Saturdays ago, I stood in Forest Park with 8,000 other people for the March of Dimes annual WalkAmerica, which raised more than \$1 million to improve the health of babies and women of childbearing age. Addressing the great crowd, Lt. Gov. Peter Kinder noted that as recently as four years ago, the death certificates of 32 babies in Missouri indicated this cause of death: "mother smoked."



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Here are some other disturbing facts:

- Nearly 20 percent of new mothers in Missouri report that they smoked during pregnancy.
- Some 200 babies in the state are born prematurely each week.
- Every week, 13 Missouri babies who were born prematurely and of low birth weight die before reaching their first birthdays. Smoking during pregnancy is one of the causes of both conditions.

In addition, health care costs — including insurance premiums paid by businesses — are inflated by the expensive care required for premature babies. The cost to treat a newborn for one incident of respiratory distress — a common effect of smoking by the mother during pregnancy or secondhand smoke — is estimated at \$68,000, according to a report by the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research. A March of Dimes analysis of national employer data showed that the average cost of the delivery of a premature baby is \$42,000 — 15 times that of a full-term delivery with no complications.

These figures are just part of the estimated \$2.1 billion in annual health care costs in Missouri attributable to smoking.

The Missouri Legislature has a chance to do something about this major problem before its session ends this month, something it has failed to do for six years.

Under the terms of a settlement with tobacco companies, Missouri receives more than \$150 million a year from the companies. Some

of that money is supposed to go to programs to help people stop smoking. Indeed, a February 2007 survey by the Center for Social Sciences and Public Policy Research at Missouri State University found that 78 percent of Missourians believe money from the tobacco settlement *should* be spent on tobacco prevention programs.

Yet since 2001, Missouri has not spent a single dollar of the settlement funds on tobacco prevention. Missouri's lack of support for stop-smoking programs means fewer people get the help they need to quit smoking — pregnant mothers included. That

leads to more premature births, more early deaths and higher health care costs for everyone.

The state budget proposal for the 2008 fiscal year originally included \$1 million for tobacco prevention programs. That was cut by the Senate to \$200,000.

Reducing the number of premature births is the highest priority of the March of Dimes nationwide and in Missouri. This year, we are investing \$5 million in community groups, public health organizations and higher education in Missouri toward that goal.

Missouri can do something about these staggering numbers and help the actual babies and families behind the statistics. By investing \$1 million of the tobacco companies' settlement money, the Legislature can treat the cause — not merely the symptoms — of a public health crisis. The \$1 million will fund proven smoking-cessation programs across the state in schools and workplaces and through community organizations. It will pay for the expansion of stop-smoking hotlines and creation of an effective marketing campaign aimed at young people and adults.

We urge state senators and representatives to join us in the fight against premature birth by funding smoking cessation programs in full.

Deborah Kersting is executive director of the March of Dimes Missouri Chapter.