

State's anti-tobacco efforts for youth making strides

Published: Jan 19, 2006 12:30 AM

LISA HOPPENJANS, Staff Writer

North Carolina, long dominated by loyalty to the golden leaf, is now one of the nation's surprise success stories in fighting youth tobacco use.

That's the conclusion of an independent evaluator who studied the state's Teen Tobacco Use Prevention and Cessation Initiative.

Dr. Adam Goldstein, director of UNC-Chapel Hill's Tobacco Use Prevention and Evaluation Programs, said North Carolina's teen initiative had made major progress in its second year.

Among the biggest accomplishments cited are boosting funding from \$6.2 million in the first year to \$15 million for 2004-2005, and moving North Carolina from 30th to 21st in the nation for funding youth tobacco prevention programs.

"For a place like North Carolina, that's huge," Goldstein said.

The state's "Tobacco. Reality. Unfiltered." anti-tobacco ad campaign reached 45 percent of 11- to 17-year-olds in 2004, according to a statewide survey of about 600 youth.

The campaign featured teens telling stories of loved ones lost to lung cancer. Some commercials also showed former tobacco users such as Gruen von Behrens, who started using smokeless tobacco at 13 and was diagnosed with oral cancer four years later. In one ad, von Behrens, who has had part of his tongue and neck removed, tells an auditorium of students that he has had 35 surgeries.

Goldstein, whose evaluation covers the program from April 2004 to June 2005, also cites as a sign of success the fact that 24 more school districts banned smoking on school property, in school vehicles or at school events. Twenty of those districts passed policies with the help of the program's grant recipients. More than half of the state's 115 districts now have such policies.

But it's tough to tell what impact the program has had on youth smoking rates. The most recent rates available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are from 2003, when the program was just getting off the ground. Goldstein looks forward to the release of the 2005 numbers, which should be available in a few months.

"I'm very optimistic that we will actually see substantial reductions in North Carolina's youth tobacco consumption," he said. "I'm hoping that we'll see historic reductions."

The program is funded through the state's Health and Wellness Trust Fund, created by the General Assembly with money from the state's share of the national tobacco settlement. Alison McLaurin, director of marketing and public affairs for the trust fund, said \$16.5 million has been allocated to the teen tobacco prevention initiative for fiscal 2005-2006.

The program still faces obstacles. Eighteen- to 24-year-olds have the highest smoking rate in the state, and the smoking rate grew in that age group by about 3 percent from 2003 to 2004. And a recent report by the American Lung Association gives North Carolina failing grades for its tobacco control.

Goldstein said that report is unfair, failing to take into account how far the state has come.

"If you look at what's happened here compared to three years ago, it's so substantive," he said.

Alamance County received a three-year, \$200,000 grant through the program. Kurt Ward, a substance-abuse prevention specialist for the Alamance-Caswell Mental Health center who oversees the grant, said he has already seeing an impact.

Smoking rates among Alamance high school students dropped from 25 percent when the program started to 22 percent last March. Smoke-free restaurants in Alamance County have increased by 58.

Still, progress can be slow in a state built on tobacco, Ward said. Efforts to persuade the Alamance County school board to adopt a 100 percent tobacco-free schools program failed. The board tabled the issue in spring 2003 and hasn't picked it back up.

"We're still attempting to overcome a product that is so historically tied to this community," Ward said.

Staff writer Lisa Hoppenjans can be reached at 932-2014 or lisa.hoppenjans@newsobserver.com.