

# New Jersey set to hand over millions in tobacco cash

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Gov. Chris Christie has dedicated his final year in office to addressing the opioid epidemic, but the state's failure to spend on smoking cessation efforts when thousands of people still die annually from tobacco-related illnesses has drawn derision from advocates and public health officials.

Instead of spending millions from a landmark 1998 settlement with the [tobacco industry](#) on smoking cessation efforts, New Jersey this year will begin repaying hundreds of millions of dollars to bondholders after converting the settlement money into \$90 million to fill a budget hole in 2014.

The Christie administration, in fact, slashed [state funding](#) for smoking cessation from around \$7 million when he took office to zero dollars since 2013. Spending cuts on the programs after he took office led to the closure across the state of 17 centers dedicated to quitting. The 13 full-time positions at the Rutgers Tobacco Dependence Program that conduct outreach and education programs were eliminated, according to Dr. Michael Steinberg, Rutgers Department of Medicine vice chairman who now volunteers to run the program.

"It is a disgrace," Steinberg said. "People have become numb to the death and morbidity related to tobacco. Imagine ... that three fully loaded 747 jets crashed today and then three more crashed tomorrow, and the next day. That is the magnitude of death from tobacco."

The scaling back of programs to help smokers quit and steer young

people away from tobacco has led to the American Lung Association giving the state an F in a review of how much states spend on [tobacco control programs](#).

The Christie administration argues that the state's [smoking rates](#) are declining, down to 15.1 percent in 2015 from 27.9 percent for adults in 1990, according to the state Department of Health. It's unclear whether the rate changed since state funding for tobacco control ended.

The state uses around \$2 million from the federal government on a hotline and website to help those seeking to quit smoking, and the Christie administration also points to a \$2.70 per pack cigarette tax it says has been a deterrent, especially to teenagers. Data showing smoking rates since the tax rose to its current rate were not immediately available.

Christie spokesman Brian Murray said the dangers of smoking have been "culturally recognized" over three generations, while the opioid crisis is "rising in scope." He questioned the notion of linking state money to results.

"It is seriously disingenuous for anyone to point to any government budget lines to assess what is being done to address any social concern, particularly New Jersey's well-recognized interest and success in reducing the abuse of tobacco products," Murray said.

But tobacco cessation advocates say that it's the wrong approach, and that the administration should consider addressing both problems.

"One population shouldn't suffer because we're helping another," said Marc Kaplan, a spokesman for the American Cancer Society.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates about 480,000 people nationwide die annually from tobacco-related illness. In New

Jersey, the CDC estimates about 11,800 die from smoking-related diseases every year, based on a 2014 surgeon general's report .

Tobacco control programs are effective, according to the CDC . In New Jersey, Rutgers' state-funded [smoking cessation](#) program had a long-term success rate of 35 percent, while national rates are around 25 percent, according to Steinberg.

This year, the state begins handing over to bondholders cash that pours into New Jersey's coffers every year thanks to the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between 46 states and the tobacco industry. New Jersey is expected to pay out about \$400 million through 2023 to bondholders to repay the \$90 million infusion the Christie administration needed to close the 2014 budget hole.

The 1998 agreement ensured that the tobacco industry would pay states billions of dollars in perpetuity, with the aim of directing cash to programs to stop smoking. New Jersey was a leader in the field in the early 2000's, but that began to change when the administrations of Democrats Jim McGreevey and Jon Corzine began trading settlement cash for money upfront. When the Republican Christie took office in 2010, he ended the state's \$7 million spending on tobacco programs. At the time, he cited declining rates of [tobacco](#) use.

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