



Maine Medical Association

Erik N. Steele, DO, President | Paul R. Cain, MD, President-Elect | R. Scott Hanson, MD, MPH, Chair, Board of Directors
Andrew B. MacLean, JD, CEO | Dan Morin, Director of Communications & Government Affairs

●SUPPORT Maine Physicians ●ADVANCE the quality of medicine in Maine ●PROMOTE the health of all Maine People

TO: Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations & Financial Affairs
Joint Standing Committee on Health & Human Services
Room 228, State House

FROM: Maine Medical Association

DATE: Wednesday, February 22, 2023, 1:00 p.m.

TESTIMONY OF THE MAINE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION NEITHER FOR NOR AGAINST

L.D. 258, THE GOVERNOR'S SFY 2024-2025 BIENNIAL BUDGET PROPOSAL

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and Members of the Appropriations Committee, and also Good Afternoon to Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer and Members of the Health & Human Services Committee. My name is Lani Graham, M.D., M.P.H. I am a resident of Freeport and a member of the Public Health Committee (PHC) of the Maine Medical Association (MMA). I am a former Chief Public health Officer for Maine.

The MMA is a professional organization representing more than 4300 physicians, residents, and medical students in Maine whose mission is to support Maine physicians, advance the quality of medicine in Maine, and promote the health of all Maine people.

I am here on behalf of my colleagues in the medical community to ask you to consider increasing your support for our public health system during your deliberations of this biennial budget. I am not speaking to any specific line in the proposed budget and the MMA supports the Governor's biennial budget proposal as a whole. We simply could not pass up the opportunity to tell you that we believe more investment in public health in Maine is vitally important to the health of our population if you can identify the resources to do so.

Support for public health in Maine is one of the top three priorities of the MMA in the 131st Maine Legislature and with good reason. We have just been through the terrible COVID-19 pandemic when every citizen of this state hung on the updates provided daily by Dr. Shah. Physicians and patients alike found out how important public health could be to survival. We were so lucky to be led by a well-trained and capable physician who could meet the challenge

despite the disadvantages of a public health department that had been seriously weakened in the preceding years.

After several years of cuts, the Maine CDC was left with about 100 fewer employees in 2019 than in 2011 - a 25% reduction in staff. Maine is not alone. Nationwide, less than 3% of the health care budget is spent on public health and prevention. This would be typical of the approach to public health in Maine and in the nation. When looking for money to spend on immediate needs, public health and prevention are often targets. But this is short sighted. Insufficient support for public health not only left us vulnerable to an infectious disease pandemic but has also resulted in the neglect of all public health services, including a failure to control other epidemics such as opioid addiction, vaping, traffic fatalities, obesity, and suicide. And now, having survived the pandemic, we seem to be ready to go back to "business as usual" forgetting the vital role that public health plays in keeping Maine people healthy.

In 2022, a report was published of the relative health of states around the country. Maine ranked 26th in overall health of the population and last among the New England states. ¹

Hospitals are becoming overwhelmed by illnesses that might reasonably be reduced by a strong public health system - late-stage cancer, hypertension induced strokes, out-of-control Diabetes, chronic obstructive lung disease, and of course the opioid epidemic. We all know that the old saw is true: "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

I am here to make a plea for adequate funding of public health. We all cheered to hear that there were some public health federal dollars expected, but the people of Maine deserve more. Currently Maine stands below the median among states for public health funding.²

As long as I have worked in public health, strong, unwavering support has been lacking. If we do not support public health now, after a clear demonstration of the need, when will we? Our public health system is chronically underfunded, understaffed, and in some sectors being stripped of its legal powers.³

Maine, unlike many states, does not have a strong county public health system. Our regional public health infrastructure consisting of eight districts and a tribal district were defunded

¹ <https://www.americashealthrankings.org>

² <https://publichealthmaps.org/motw-2021/2021/4/5/5-april-2021-per-person-state-public-health-funding-united-states>

³ https://truthout.org/articles/underfunding-public-health-is-a-decision-to-let-people-die-in-the-next-pandemic/?qclid=CjwKCAiA_6yfBhBNEiwAkmXy53ADwz9P9UhtmlK5BGJBlTZSOG-p0hrO9vox8sn9-QvUidelsYiBx5RoChEUQAvD_BwE

before the current Administration of Governor Mills. It seems unlikely that that this system is back to full strength. Sustained funding for the new Maine Prevention Network could accomplish much.

We recognize that there are many competing needs for state dollars. But we want to draw to your attention one strategy that could support public health while at the same time reducing a deadly threat to Maine youth - tobacco. A sheet is attached to this testimony outlining the advantages to using this strategy.

Thank you for considering the Maine Medical Association's concern about Maine's long-term investment in its public health infrastructure – a critical investment in the health of future generations of Mainers. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.



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Support Public Health with Tobacco Tax

BACKGROUND

As we consider this legislative session as well as actions needed in the next Congress, it appears that there is an overwhelming array of issues to be addressed. But, thanks to the tragedy of Covid-19, there is one issue that must surely be considered at the top of the list. That would be on-going, solid, **financial support for public health**.

After several years of cuts to Maine CDC, the agency was left with about 100 fewer employees in 2019 than in 2011 - a 25% reduction in staff. Insufficient support for public health here in Maine and the nation has not only left us vulnerable to an infectious disease pandemic but has also resulted in the neglect of all public health services, including a failure to control other epidemics such as opioid addiction, vaping, traffic fatalities, obesity, and suicide. Furthermore, hospitals are becoming overwhelmed by illnesses that might reasonably be reduced by a strong public health system—late stage cancer, hypertension induced strokes, out of control Diabetes, chronic obstructive lung disease and cardiac failure.

Even in these difficult financial times, a source of funding is needed. While there would potentially be many choices, the most obvious one for Maine in 2023 is an increase in the tobacco tax which will not only support Maine's public health system but also reduce tobacco use, particularly among vulnerable youth.

KEY POINTS

- Tobacco remains our #1 underlying cause of premature death.
- On average, smokers die 10 years earlier than non-smokers.
- On average, about half of all tobacco users will die from tobacco.
- Smoking costs the U.S. \$300 billion per year, including about \$170 billion in direct medical care for adults.
- Nationally, estimated smoking-caused health costs and lost productivity totals \$19.16 per pack, far lower than the ~\$3 in federal and state excise taxes on each pack.
- 17% of Maine's high school students vape (use e-cigarettes), higher than the national rate of 14%.
- There are 4,200 Maine high school students who smoke cigarettes, higher than the national rate.
- 29% of the cancer deaths in Maine are attributable to smoking
- \$811 million dollars of annual health care costs are directly caused by smoking

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- Smoking costs Medicaid in Maine (MaineCare) about \$262 million per year.
- \$647 million dollars of productivity in Maine is lost to smoking each year
- There are 27,000 kids under 18 alive today who will ultimately die prematurely from smoking
- Maine's tax on a pack of cigarettes has not changed since 2005.
- Maine's current tax of \$2.00 on a pack of cigarettes is the second lowest in New England
- Maine's tobacco tax used to be one of the highest, it is now #19, while Maine's smoking rate of 17.3% is the highest in New England and higher than the national rate
- Raising state cigarette taxes always increases state revenues and always reduces smoking.

LEGISLATIVE REQUEST

We respectfully propose consideration of a \$2 per pack increase in the state excise tax as well as proportionate increases in other nicotine products, including e-cigarettes, cigars, and chew tobacco. The resulting \$4 per pack excise tax would result in Maine's having the third highest rate in New England (now 5th). It would result in millions of dollars in state revenues for public health. The last time Maine raised the tobacco tax was in 2005.

Most important is preserving a fair share of the generated funding for public health work in Maine. We ask that drafted legislation support assuring that at least fifty percent (50%) of the funds generated from this tax be directed to public health support for the Maine Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Increasing the tobacco tax is a win-win-win solution for states: a public health win that reduces smoking and saves lives, a financial win that reduces smoking-caused health care costs and raises much-needed revenue, and a political win because tobacco taxes have the strong support of the public. Even the tobacco industry acknowledges that raising tobacco taxes reduce smoking, which is why they fight so hard to oppose them.

Resources:

https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fast_facts/index.htm

<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/fact-sheets>

<https://www.cdc.gov/statesystem/factsheets/ECigarette/ECigTax.html>

<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/problem/toll-us/maine>

<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/assets/factsheets/0097.pdf>

State excise taxes as of June, 2020

CT: \$4.35

RI: \$4.25

MA: \$3.51

VT: \$3.08

ME: \$2.00

NH: \$1.78

<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/assets/factsheets/0097.pdf>