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Commentary: Maine has rare second chance to invest in healthy kids, productive workforce

Bipartisan L.D. 1961 would secure our share of the 1998 tobacco settlement for its original intent: reducing youth smoking and improving public health.

By Dennis Keschl and Linda Sanborn
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What would we create today, with 20 years of hindsight, if we learned that Maine was about to receive \$40 million every year, in perpetuity, to settle a lawsuit against the tobacco industry?

Second chances don't come around very often, especially when it comes to such a large annuity. Yet this is exactly the question to be asking right now, as we face an impossible financial bind that is also a game-changing opportunity to recommit and reinvest in the health, hope and productivity of Maine children and adults.

The Fund for a Healthy Maine, Maine's share of the 1998 national tobacco settlement, can no longer fund both the prevention and treatment of chronic illness. A choice must be made, and with that choice comes our second chance to secure these funds for their original intent – reducing youth smoking and improving public health.

Twenty years ago, Maine did what few other states managed to do with the master settlement – we set politics aside and played the long game. We gained [national recognition](#) for focusing the Fund for a Healthy Maine on the prevention of expensive chronic illness. And to this day, Maine remains the only state to have attained [a straight-A scorecard](#) from the American Lung Association for our commitment to tobacco prevention and control.

But even the best policies are not perfect, and while the original Fund for a Healthy Maine provided a balanced roadmap for preventing disease and promoting public health, structural and political weaknesses have resulted in [medical care](#) now [consuming](#) 93 percent of Fund for a Healthy Maine revenue.

Put another way: If no action is taken to restructure and rebalance the Fund for a Healthy Maine before the next biennial budget, only \$3 million will be available each year for public health. This means we may not have the resources needed to fully fund Maine's tobacco program; confront the vaping and opioid epidemics, and tackle obesity, Lyme disease, infant mortality, childhood hunger and other known and emerging public health concerns.

This is simply unacceptable. As policymakers, we have a responsibility and a duty to act. In doing so, we can give ourselves a fresh start – a second chance – at investing the tobacco settlement in the health and productivity of our kids, our grandkids and our communities.

This week, the Health and Human Services Committee will consider bipartisan legislation that charts a course out of the Fund for a Healthy Maine budget hole by restructuring the tobacco settlement into the Trust for a Healthy Maine.

Trustees with deep expertise and experience in public health will design an allocation plan for settlement dollars that starts with funding Maine's tobacco program at [the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-recommended level](#). Trustees will set aside a portion of the settlement for rapid response to emerging threats, like the coronavirus, and they will allocate the remainder to evidence-based public health programs that align with a multiyear state health plan. Medical care will be phased out of the Fund for a Healthy Maine, and moved to the General Fund, where it can be stabilized, fully funded and secured.

We have introduced this bipartisan bill, [L.D. 1961, An Act to Establish the Trust for a Healthy Maine](#), to resolve the false choice between medical care and public health, thereby providing reliable and much-needed funding for the Maine CDC to strengthen and sustain a modern, flexible and cost-effective system for improving health and productivity across the state.

The trust is based on a proven model – the Efficiency Maine Trust, which successfully allocates almost \$90 million every year to programs that improve energy efficiency in Maine homes and businesses and brings our state closer to energy independence.

The 119th Legislature did an amazing thing in [their creation](#) of the Fund for a Healthy Maine. It has served us well and much longer than most states' efforts to protect this special revenue for tobacco prevention and public health. As members of the 129th Legislature, it's now our responsibility to preserve and protect this legacy.

We are two members of the Appropriations Committee, who sit on opposite sides of the aisle, but like lawmakers did 20 years ago when Maine's first tobacco settlement check arrived, we are working together to chart a course for the next 20 years and capitalize on this rare second chance to invest in healthy kids and a productive workforce.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dennis Keschl, a Republican state representative from Belgrade, and **Linda Sanborn**, a Democratic state senator from Gorham, both serve on the Appropriations Committee.