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ANNIVERSARY

UP IN SMOKE: The good news? The 16.4 percent of Massachusetts adults who are thought to be regular smokers is less than the national average, which is just under 20 percent. The bad news? More than 8,000 people die each year in the state from smoking, according to the Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program.

With an eye to reducing that number and the thousands of tobacco-related illnesses that amount to some \$4.3 billion in personal health care expenses in Massachusetts yearly, the commonwealth celebrates the 34th annual Great American Smokeout today, along with other states across the country.

Christine Sass, director of the Tobacco Free Community Partnership and Wellness Programs of Hampshire County, said the Smokeout is an annual reminder that seeks to spread the message that quitting smoking for one day is the first step in quitting smoking for good.

"Since the Smokeout began, we have made strides toward helping people stop smoking or not start in the first place," said Sass.

According to study recently released by the state Department of Health, the adult smoking rate in Hampshire County's four largest communities ranges from a low of 12.9 percent in Amherst to a high of 22 percent in Ware. The statewide average is 16.1 percent.

The study also shows the impact of a smoking cessation benefit, which provides

support services and medication to smokers who are members of MassHealth. The benefit has been used by 36.7 percent of MassHealth smokers in Hampshire County and more than 90 percent in Ware since it was first offered in 2006.

Legislation prohibiting smoking in workplaces and limiting tobacco advertisements have done their part, she said, as has monitoring the sale of tobacco products to minors. In recent years, both the rise in the price of cigarettes has discouraged smoking while pharmaceutical programs, such as nicotine replacement therapies, have made it easier to stop, she said.

Still, as anyone who's smoked for any length of time will tell, giving up cigarettes isn't easy.

"The average smoker tries to quit five to seven times before they quit," said Sass.

For those who want to make smoking a thing of the past, Sass recommends setting a date and making plan.

"Go online and find a program," said Sass. "Think ahead about how you're going to quit. There are a lot of those kinds of strategies." If one doesn't work, try another or work with your health care provider, she said.

And remember, it's a serious addiction. "Don't be too hard on yourself, said Sass. "Just don't give up. It's a long hard road."

For information, call (800) Try-to-Stop (879-8678) or visit www.cancer.org/greatamericans and www.makesmokinghistory.org.

— PHOEBE MITCHELL