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Quit-smoking benefit reduces costly health problems

By D.J. Wilson

The 2006 health care reform law provides for low-cost tobacco cessation services for smokers on MassHealth. This benefit was introduced with a targeted promotion campaign by the Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program promoting over-the-counter and prescription quitting aids made available for no more than a \$3 co-pay.

As a result, smoking rates in the MassHealth population have decreased by 26 percent in the last two years.

The reduction is largely attributed to the information campaign conducted by the state's anti-tobacco program, resulting in 75,000 people using the smoking cessation benefit between July 2006 and May 2009. At the height of the campaign, 75 percent of MassHealth members knew that the new benefit was available.

The medical and financial benefits of the drop in smoking rates among the state's poor have been both immediate and substantial.

Researchers at the Department of Public Health reviewed approximately 13,000 records of MassHealth patients who used quit aids such as nicotine patches, nicotine gum, Chantix or Zyban. Over the last two and a half years, the DPH has found measurable drops in heart attack hospitalizations, emergency room visits for asthma attacks, and claims for adverse maternal birth complications.

Heart attack hospitalizations among MassHealth subscribers who used the cessation benefit dropped by 38 percent after the first year, preventing dozens of heart attacks among low-income patients and avoiding the cost of treating them. In Massachusetts, care for an average heart attack hospitalization costs \$47,600.

These research indicators are expected to improve as the smoking cessation benefit continues to drive MassHealth subscribers to quit. Data will also become available to measure longer-term benefits regarding stroke episodes, cancer onset, and complications in diabetics among the MassHealth population.

These findings support the argument that municipal employers can benefit from efforts to get their smoking employees to "kick the habit," resulting in a healthier workforce and lower health insurance costs in both the short and long term.