



STATE OF OKLAHOMA

For Immediate Release: August 20, 2003

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Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline Launched

Toll-Free Line Provides Help for State Tobacco Users

OKLAHOMA CITY – Oklahomans who are addicted to tobacco now have free help available through a toll-free statewide phone line, state leaders announced at a Capitol news conference on Wednesday. The Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline, 1-866-PITCH 'EM, is funded by the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust Fund.

Governor Brad Henry, State Treasurer Robert Butkin, Attorney General Drew Edmondson and Dr. Robert McCaffree, chair of the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust Fund Board of Directors participated in the Capitol news conference. All were involved in creation of the state's tobacco settlement fund, a constitutional amendment approved by voters to permanently set aside a portion of Oklahoma's tobacco settlement, invest the funds and spend the earnings on programs like the helpline.

Governor Henry, who, as state senator, authored the constitutional amendment legislation, said the helpline is available to everyone.

"The healthcare costs of tobacco use are staggering and have a serious impact on all Oklahomans. For the sake of public health, we need to give people the help they need to kick the habit," Henry said. "The helpline is a significant boost for Oklahomans who want to stop smoking."

Treasurer Butkin, who chairs the board that invests the tobacco funds and who helped push for passage of Henry's legislation, said the tobacco helpline is an excellent start.

"This is the first program funded by investment earnings from the tobacco settlement," Butkin said. "When I quit smoking more than 10 years ago, it was very difficult. A helpline such as this one would have been a big benefit for me. I know it can and will help hundreds, if not thousands, of Oklahomans to give up the habit."

The tobacco helpline is operated by a nonprofit health maintenance organization, Group Health Cooperative, located in Washington. Through competitive bidding, it won a five-year contract that is renewable each year. The cost for the first year of operation is \$475,000, funded entirely by interest earnings on the state's tobacco settlement trust fund.

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Considered among the nation's best for such services, Group Health also operates tobacco helplines for Georgia, Minnesota, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin.

Attorney General Drew Edmondson, who was a leader in the national tobacco settlement, said this is exactly the type of program the investment fund was created to support.

"Public health was at the heart of our lawsuit against big tobacco," Edmondson said. "Oklahomans overwhelmingly supported the creation of the tobacco trust because they wanted the settlement money used for that purpose. This helpline is a step in the right direction, and will make the difficult task of quitting a little bit easier."

Dr. Robert McCaffree, M.D., who, in addition to chairing the fund's board of directors, is a practicing pulmonary physician at the OU Health Sciences Center, said information provided to callers can make a big difference.

"There's no magic bullet for quitting tobacco use," McCaffree said. "However, the professional counselors at 1-866-PITCH 'EM have the training and experience to give tobacco users the information they need to be successful."

The state leaders said the start of the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline comes right before the September 1st implementation of the Oklahoma Smoking in Public Places and Indoor Workplaces Act that will greatly curtail where smoking is allowed. The toll-free line can be used to help workers who may want to quit, they said.

In November 1998, Attorney General Edmondson and seven other attorneys general announced they had, on behalf of the states, negotiated a historic settlement with big tobacco. Oklahoma filed its lawsuit in August 1996, becoming the 14th state to file a lawsuit against the tobacco companies. Oklahoma's share of the settlement is estimated to be \$2.3 billion over the next 25 years.

In November 2000, Oklahoma voters approved the constitutional amendment that created the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust Fund. During this fiscal year, 60 percent of tobacco settlement funds received will be deposited into the trust fund. Each subsequent year, an additional five percent of the receipts will be placed into the fund until it caps at 75 percent.

The balance on the fund today is approximately \$130 million from which investment earnings are derived. A total of \$1.4 million in earnings was certified for use last fiscal year. On Thursday, the fund's board of investors will certify earnings for this fiscal year.

In addition to paying for operation of the tobacco helpline, funds will also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the service and to conduct a promotional media campaign.

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