

Department of Health announces \$468,000 in federal funding aimed at preventing youth access to tobacco

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PROVIDENCE – The Rhode Island Department of Health (HEALTH) announced today that it will receive approximately \$468,000 of new federal funding to conduct an in-depth evaluation of policies and practices within the state aimed at preventing youth access to tobacco. Through the study, if Rhode Island's practices are proven to lead to reductions in tobacco use among youth, the results may then be incorporated into national, evidence-based strategies. Rhode Island has seen a sharp decline in smoking rates among youth under the age of 18 since 2010, as promising tobacco-control initiatives involving youth have increased. Only four other states have received similar awards to conduct such studies.

"Rhode Island is proud to be recognized as an innovator and leader in tobacco-control practices that protect our youth from tobacco exposure, addiction, severe illnesses, and premature death," said **NICOLE ALEXANDER-SCOTT, MD, MPH**, Director Designee at HEALTH. "This evaluation project will give Rhode Island a strong voice in this critical, nationwide dialogue. A closer study of what has worked for Rhode Island can help keep the tobacco industry from preying on more youth in our state as well as across the country."

Rhode Island's 17.4% adult smoking rate is below the

national average and the state has the second-lowest youth smoking rate in the country at 8%. However, there continues to be a need for these tobacco control efforts. Rhode Island is only one of four states where the rate for high school cigar use surpasses cigarettes. Additionally, more than 8% of Rhode Island youth reported using a hookah in the past 30 days, and a survey of Rhode Island youth found that more than 28% reported buying retail tobacco products, which stands among the highest of such rates in the U.S.

In addition to the new funding, Rhode Island has received \$1million for core tobacco control program activities. This represents a 10% reduction for core tobacco control activities compared to previous years. Still, HEALTH remains committed to offering comprehensive programs and seeking innovative ways to raise public awareness about tobacco prevention and control.

The Rhode Island Department of Health Tobacco Control Program promotes and supports free services and clinical resources available to help Rhode Islanders quit smoking and to protect the public from the dangers of second-hand smoke exposure. For more information, visit health.ri.gov/healthrisks/tobacco or visit QuitNowRI.com. ❖

Rates of HIV, other STDs increasing in RI, nationwide

PROVIDENCE – The Rhode Island Department of Health (HEALTH) released data recently showing that the rates of HIV and several other STDs are increasing. In Rhode Island, from 2013 to 2014:

- The number of infectious syphilis cases increased by 79%.
- The number of gonorrhea cases increased by 30%.
- The number of newly-identified HIV cases increased by nearly 33%.
- New cases of HIV/AIDS and infectious syphilis continued to increase among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men at a faster rate than in other populations.
- Infection rates of all STDs continued to have a greater impact on the African-American, Hispanic, and young adult populations.

"These data send a clear signal that despite the progress we have made in reducing STDs and HIV over the years, there is more work to do," said Nicole Alexander-Scott, MD, MPH, Director Designee at HEALTH. "We are fortunate in Rhode Island to have great partnerships among state agencies, community-based organizations, and healthcare providers to continue to educate, test, and treat for sexually transmitted diseases. This trend reminds us that we cannot become complacent."

During the 1980s and 1990s, key public health programs helped reduce the transmission of HIV and other STDs. Routine testing of pregnant women has almost eliminated the number of Rhode Island babies born to mothers with HIV. Likewise, needle exchange programs have drastically reduced transmission among injection drug users.

The recent uptick in STDs in Rhode Island follows a national trend. The increase has been attributed to better testing by providers and to high-risk behaviors that have become more common in recent years. High-risk behaviors include using social media to arrange casual and often anonymous sexual encounters, having sex without a condom, having multiple sex partners, and having sex while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. ❖