

# ARKANSAS

## Tobacco Tax Increase: A Major Win for the Arkansas Cancer Coalition

In 2009, with the Governor's support, the Arkansas Senate approved a 56-cent tax increase for cigarettes and raised the sales tax on other tobacco products from 32% to 68%. Combined with the state's existing 59 cents per pack tax on cigarettes, the state cigarette tax now totals \$1.15 per pack, moving Arkansas up 15 spots to the 27th-highest tax on cigarettes in the country. Until recently, Arkansas ranked 38th highest out of the nation's 50 states for its tax on cigarettes, meaning 37 other states were doing more to improve their residents' health.

Officials say the Arkansas tax increase, when combined with federal matching dollars, will pay for nearly \$180 million in expanded health programs. Early on, it was determined that a portion of funds generated would be used to support goals and objectives outlined in the Arkansas Cancer Plan. "One of the things we have to ensure is that we do what we said we were going to do and make sure that these funds go into the right appropriation pots, the right agencies, the right bills, so that the money is expended exactly like it was sold," Governor Mike Beebe said.

The Plan provides recommendations for implementing and improving cancer control strategies, and encourages the collaboration of government, the private and nonprofit sectors, and Arkansas' communities and people. Using evidence-based goals and objectives, it has received a prestigious award for making progress to reduce the burden of cancer in Arkansas.

Arkansas Cancer Coalition (ARCC) accomplished this success in collaboration with the Step-Up Coalition. ARCC has been a member of the Step-Up Coalition since its inception. The Step-Up Coalition is a broad-based group of health care and community advocacy organizations that formed in August 2006.

Its mission is to protect and improve the health of Arkansans by using evidence-based strategies to decrease tobacco use and promote programs that reduce risk for, treat, and prevent disease. The Step-Up Coalition has been a leading proponent of increasing the tax on tobacco in Arkansas.

During the 86th General Assembly, the Coalition successfully organized partners and gained considerable support within the legislature. The Coalition secured legislative sponsors during the 2007 legislative session and filed legislation that reflected its planning work. The Coalition leadership provided grassroots and media advocacy tools to empower its diverse membership. The proposed House Bill 1739 would have raised the tobacco tax by 50 cents, with half of the proceeds directed to the state's general revenue fund and the other half dedicated to health care programs. The bill failed, but it allowed the Coalition to build support and meet with key people to further its mission.

In preparation for the 2009 legislative session, the Step-Up Coalition met to outline its next attempt to increase the Arkansas tobacco tax. The group proposed a cigarette excise tax increase with revenue being used to fund a statewide trauma system in addition to other health-related initiatives. The Coalition enlisted the help of partners statewide, including the ARCC, to facilitate a grassroots advocacy campaign. The ARCC worked with the Step-Up Coalition to call legislators and submit letters to the editor to educate about the benefits of raising taxes on tobacco products in hopes of fostering public support.

Through broad-based collaborative action, \$2 million was successfully secured for implementation of the Arkansas Cancer Plan.

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