Teen Smoking Rates Drop to Historic Low

But without continued tobacco prevention funding, tobacco use could increase

RALEIGH—The teen cigarette smoking rate in North Carolina reached an historic low in 2011, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Secretary Al Delia announced today. Since 2003, teen cigarette smoking rates have fallen steadily, according to results from the 2011 NC Youth Tobacco Survey. The survey finds that the middle school smoking rate dropped to 4.2 percent from 4.3 percent in 2009, and high school smoking lowered to 15.5 percent from 16.7 percent in 2009. These are all-time lows for each group.

Influential on the consistent drop in rates is the TRU (Tobacco. Reality. Unfiltered) Program, a prevention initiative that targets youth through media campaigns and school and community programs (www.tru.nc.gov). The General Assembly has eliminated funding as of July 1 for TRU and other tobacco prevention and cessation programs. Governor Bev Perdue proposed $10 million in her budget released last week to begin restoring support for these essential initiatives.

Since 2003, middle school smoking dropped by 55 percent from 9.3 percent to 4.2 percent and high school smoking decreased by 43 percent from 27.3 percent to 15.5 percent. Before the TRU program, North Carolina saw only modest improvements in youth cigarette smoking rates.

The TRU Program was originally funded by the Health and Wellness Trust Fund (HWTF) with funds from the Master Settlement Agreement with major tobacco companies. Leaders in the General Assembly abolished that widely-respected fund last year in spite of Governor Perdue’s strong objections. Funding for TRU was relocated to the DHHS during FY 2011-12, but was not set to recur.

“Now is not the time to give up our efforts to prevent young people from using tobacco. Our success in reducing teen smoking rates will save lives and health care dollars down the road,” said Secretary Delia. “That is why Governor Perdue is building back support to continue this program by putting recurring funds in her budget proposal for 2012-13. Our work must be sustained and supported to continue to keep smoking rates down and create a healthy future for our children and grandchildren.”

Public health officials say youth tobacco prevention efforts must be sustained, because around 100,000 NC students enter middle school each year, a time when they become more vulnerable to experimentation and to influences outside the family. Almost 40 percent of smokers smoke their first cigarette by age 11, and smoking and other tobacco use increases through middle and high school. The tobacco industry spends approximately $396,000,000 marketing their products in North Carolina each year. The U.S. Surgeon General concluded in the 2012 report entitled Preventing Tobacco Use among Youth and Young Adults that there is a causal relationship between advertising and promotional efforts of tobacco companies and the initiation and progression of tobacco use among young people.