

# Cutting substance abuse prevention moves Maine backward

By Steve Rowe, Special to the BDN  
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The Fund for a Healthy Maine was established to ensure that annual receipts from the multi-state tobacco settlement are used for health-related purposes. The governor's [proposed budget](#) contains some troubling cuts to the fund. One, in particular, is the curtailment of fund investments in substance abuse prevention and treatment.

The proposed cuts would substantially reduce the number of youth, families and communities served by community coalitions known as [Healthy Maine Partnerships](#). These groups work to prevent and reduce alcohol and other drug abuse, particularly among school- and college-age youth. The cuts would also reduce treatment programs and sharply limit [treatment options](#) for people suffering from drug addiction.

Taken as a whole, these cuts would reduce by one-third the state's commitment to substance abuse prevention and treatment. The inevitable result would be more substance abuse, more addiction and higher overall costs.

Substance abuse is already one of Maine's most serious health-related problems. It is widespread and causes thousands of deaths, illnesses and disabilities each year. Reducing what little we invest in prevention and treatment will only make things worse. The effect will almost certainly add to the horrific cascade of social, health and economic problems that befall users, families and communities.

The Maine Office of Substance Abuse estimated that the [cost of substance abuse](#) to our state's economy was almost \$1.2 billion last year. That's more than \$900 for every man, woman and child in Maine.

Research results released in 2009 by [The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse](#) at Columbia University show that historically more than a quarter of Maine's annual budget is directly or indirectly related to substance abuse. CASA also found that 98 percent of that spending goes to address the human wreckage and consequences, while less than 2 percent goes to prevention and treatment.

In other words, for every tax dollar that we spend dealing with substance abuse, 98 cents goes to deal with crime, health care, social welfare and other consequences, and less than 2 cents goes to reduce the need for that spending. Joseph Califano, CASA's board chairman, describes this as "a reckless misallocation of public funds" and "unconscionable." I agree.

Rather than go upstream to prevent the formation of the powerful torrent of human and economic devastation, we seem content to wait and deal with its ugly aftermath downstream. This is not only unconscionable; it's just plain dumb. If anything, we should increase — not decrease — investments in substance abuse

Together, alcohol and opiates account for about three -fourths of drug treatment admissions in Maine. Seven out of every 10 treatment patients admit that they starting [using before age 18](#).

Alcohol is a gateway drug. Its use among teens continues to dim otherwise bright futures. In the latest [Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey](#), 35 percent of high school students reported drinking alcohol in the past month and 21 percent reported drinking five or more drinks in a row in the past month.

A few years ago, I supported legislation to increase the tax on alcohol products to deter youth drinking and to help pay for prevention and treatment services. The alcohol industry successfully defeated the bill, arguing that an alcohol tax hike would cost jobs and be bad for business.

Bad for business? Let me tell you what's bad for business. Increased sickness, death and disability are bad for business. A shortage of healthy, skilled and reliable workers is bad for business. Escalating medical care costs are bad for business.

Increased crime is bad for business. Fractured families and communities are bad for business. Unrealized human potential is bad for business. All of these problems and more are connected to substance abuse and all have huge financial and human price tags.

Further reducing our already inadequate investment in [substance abuse prevention and treatment](#) is one of the worst economic decisions we can make. We'll never realize our potential as a people and as a state unless we significantly decrease substance abuse and addiction. To that end, we should be heading upstream with more, not fewer, resources.

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[Choopersguide.com](#) is a comprehensive addiction treatment resource with over 30,000 listings for Drug Treatment Programs, [Suboxone Doctors](#), [Drug Counselors and Alcohol Counselors](#), Methadone Clinics and [Interventionists](#).