

## Smokers: Financial incentive to kick the butts?

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Dale Pratt of Streator quit smoking more than five years ago after being diagnosed with throat cancer. Had there been some financial incentive to quit the habit before then, Pratt just may have been motivated enough to stop smoking before cancer struck.



Today, Pratt says he's in favor of a bill recently introduced in both the Illinois House and Senate that could help save lives and reduce health care costs in the state by requiring insurance coverage for smoking cessation services and medications.

Sponsored by state Sen. Heather Steans, D-Chicago, and state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, the new law would require every private insurer to provide at least \$500 in coverage or reimbursement annually for tobacco use cessation programs and/or medications for plan enrollees who are age 15 or older.

A smoker taking a break with others Thursday afternoon outside the La Salle County Criminal Justice Complex in Ottawa said the new legislation would mean little to him.

"I consider smoking my personal right and I'll stop when I decide — not the government or some insurance company telling me to," said the man, who asked his name not be used.

Others in the group agreed, but some did say they would check out the plan with their insurance companies should the bill become law.

Linda Pratt of Streator had conflicting views from her husband, Dale.

Linda, sitting in the cold with cigarette in hand, has been a smoker for 39 years.

"I feel the issue is a matter of choice. I started smoking when I was under stress for a time when I was a 21-year-old, and I haven't stopped since."

Linda said she has suffered through many recent surgeries on her leg and smoking is her way of coping with pain and immobility.

Dale Pratt had a vastly different opinion. Pointing to a huge scar on his neck, he said he is a throat cancer survivor for more than five years who, at one time, polished off three to five packs a day at a cost of \$250 a month. He was all for any help, financial or otherwise, a person could get to kick the nicotine habit.

Coverage would include counseling and support groups over-the-counter nicotine replacement therapies and prescription medications.

"This is smart public policy," Stearns said in a press release. "Coupled with the public health benefit, Illinois will also see a positive return on investment for smoking cessation. Employers and insurers will save money by reducing the health care expenses associated with treatment of diseases caused by tobacco use."

Studies have demonstrated that a combination of counseling and medication is the most effective means for helping smokers successfully quit.

Senior Director Audrey Eisenberg of the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago told The Times Thursday the proposed legislation does not include hypnosis or acupuncture.

"Those are not considered evidence-based science at this time," said Eisenberg. "Perhaps, if this bill passes into law, those treatments will be included in the future."

If the bill is signed into law, Illinois would be the eighth state in the nation to force insurers to cover such medical treatments for nicotine habits.