



Contact:

ReDonah Anderson, randerson@burness.com

Gabby O'Brien, gobrien@burness.com

EMBARGOED AND NOT FOR RELEASE UNTIL MARCH 12 AT 11 A.M. EST

NEW REPORT: COVID-19 CURTAILS CALLS TO SMOKING QUITLINES NATIONWIDE

As pandemic raged in 2020 and research found links between smoking and severe COVID-19 illness, the only thing that stopped cold turkey was the decline in cigarette sales

PHOENIX (March 12, 2021)—The COVID-19 pandemic has been a boon to Big Tobacco, with requests for cessation services down 27% according to a new data paper from the North American Quitline Consortium (NAQC). The decrease in requests for stop-smoking support correlates with the slight increase in cigarette consumption reported by US Treasury Department, a marked change from years of steady decline.

According to the data paper from the North American Quitline Consortium, just over 525,000 calls were made to state quitlines through 1-800-QUIT-NOW, a 27% decrease from 2019 numbers and the lowest level seen since 2007. The drop in calls to state quitlines mirrored the timeline of the pandemic, with a 6% decrease in the first quarter of 2020, followed by decreases of 39%, 30%, and 21% in quarters two, three and four respectively, compared to 2019. In 2019, just under one third of callers were Medicaid enrollees and nearly half reported a behavioral health condition such as depression or addiction.

“There is no silver lining in this pandemic, fewer smokers are quitting and continuing to smoke puts them at high risk for worse outcomes from COVID-19,” said Linda Bailey, JD, MHS, President and CEO of the North American Quitline Consortium. “The drop in numbers means that we have to do more to promote and provide cessation services. We have to improve our reach so that people who need help can get it.”

Increasing access to cessation services has been exceptionally important in this pandemic. Cigarette smoking has long been known to [hamper immune system responses](#), especially with regards to pulmonary diseases and infections. In one recent study, British researchers [connected cigarette smoking to COVID-19 infections](#) and also found that smokers were more likely to suffer more severe variants of the disease. In another study, a meta-analysis looking at US populations identified a connection between [smoking and increased severity and mortality](#) in hospitalized COVID-19 patients.

“The pandemic took the big basket of anxieties, depression and addiction that we have in the US, and, for smokers, it put that basket on steroids,” said Catherine Saucedo, Deputy Director, Smoking Cessation

Leadership Center, University of California, San Francisco. “Even though smoking has been shown to make all these bad things worse, people stopped trying to quit. We need to recapture the momentum we had, and once again, save lives. We know how to do this.”

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), US smoking rates dropped from 42% in 1965 to 25% in 1997 to 14% in 2019. While 2020 smoking rates have not been compiled yet, cigarette consumption rates show an alarming trend: after decreasing by 4-5% annually since 2015, sales [increased 1%](#) in the first 10 months of 2020 compared to the same time frame for 2019.

“Lots of people smoke just to get through the day, you justify it to yourself that it’s ok—but it’s not,” said Katie Rodgers, a teacher and former smoker who quit for the 3rd time in 2020 as the pandemic worsened, and presented at the national news briefing releasing the report. “Smoking is supposed to ease your anxieties but the nicotine in tobacco smoke not only makes you addicted, your brain gets anxious until you light the next cigarette. No one should be addicted to that when all of us are struggling in one way or another.”

The quantitative source for this data brief was the record of calls to the national portal, 1-800-QUIT-NOW. The national portal was established in 2004 by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the National Institutes of Health to route callers to their state or territorial quitline. NCI publishes data on the number of calls to each state and territorial quitline monthly, and NAQC makes these reports available on its website.

###

The North American Quitline Consortium is an international, non-profit membership organization that seeks to promote evidence-based quitline services across diverse communities in North America.