

Poll finds support for raising tobacco tax to fund health care

WASHINGTON – Regardless of their age, gender, race, party affiliation or socioeconomic status, Americans support a 75-cent-per-pack increase in the federal tobacco tax to fund health care coverage for the nation’s uninsured children, according to a new poll.

Even 51 percent of those who describe themselves as current or occasional smokers support the increase and use of the funds to help uninsured children, said the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids in releasing the results of a nationwide survey.

The Catholic Health Association has been a strong supporter of moves to expand health insurance coverage for children and their parents through the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP, and Medicaid, and backs an increase in the tobacco tax to reach that goal, Michael Rodgers, CHA senior vice president for public policy and advocacy, told Catholic News Service June 21.

In addition to being a significant source of revenue for SCHIP expansion, he said, a higher tobacco tax “could have a prohibitive effect” on young people thinking about starting to smoke.

Sen. Gordon H. Smith, R-Ore., has proposed a 61-cent-per-pack increase, which would generate an estimated \$35 billion in funds for SCHIP over five years. Smith has pledged to bring the matter before the Senate Finance Committee, of which he is a member, as it considers legislation reauthorizing SCHIP, expected before the end of June.

In a telephone news conference June 19, Tom Nickels, senior vice president for federal relations at the American Hospital Association, called the proposal to fund SCHIP by raising the tobacco tax “a winning combination.”

“Every day in America’s hospitals, we see firsthand the debilitating effects smoking has on the health of the communities we serve,” Nickels said. “We also see the important role SCHIP plays in getting kids the health care and coverage they need

to lead healthy lives. And by raising taxes on cigarettes, we keep SCHIP strong for our children, reduce smoking and save lives.”

Danny Goldrick, vice president for research at the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, said the 75-cent-per-pack increase in the federal tobacco tax “would prevent more than 2 million kids from becoming smokers” and would convince another 1 million smokers to quit.

That would result in savings of “\$50 billion in lifetime costs related to tobacco use,” he added. “It’s a health win and a financial win.”

The poll released by Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids surveyed 1,000 likely voters and was conducted May 29-June 3 by the Mellman Group. It found support for the 75-cents-per-pack increase from 72 percent of Democrats, 67 percent of Republicans and 61 percent of independent voters. It was backed by 68 percent of the white respondents, 67 percent of the black respondents and 69 percent of Hispanic respondents.

Support by geographical region ranged from 71 percent in the Northeast to 64 percent in the Midwest and from 70 percent in big cities to 61 percent in rural areas.

The margin of error for the survey was plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

“This poll should send a clear message to members of Congress that voters – across the board – want America’s 9 million uninsured children to gain health coverage and support a tobacco tax to pay for it,” said Ron Pollack, executive director of the health care consumer group Families USA, at the news conference.

A poll released June 18 by CHA found that 71 percent of Americans who said they were likely to vote in the next presidential election believe that “the federal government should take financial responsibility to cover uninsured children.” Less than a year earlier only 65 percent of respondents to an identical question said that.

More than half of the respondents (51 percent) said they “would be willing to pay more in taxes to help pay for health insurance for children.”

Asked what they thought should be the government’s top priority at this time, after

the war in Iraq, 29 percent of likely voters said “providing affordable, quality health care” should receive the greatest government attention. Homeland security, reducing government spending and taxes, education, jobs creation and fighting crime and gun violence all were ranked as lower priorities in the poll.

“The American public is rightly coming to the conclusion that health care is an urgent matter for this country,” said Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity who is CHA president and CEO, in a statement. “We look forward to building on this wave of public support in the coming months – and for the 2008 election cycle.”

The CHA survey was conducted May 21-23 by Public Opinion Strategies and had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

A separate survey released June 20 by the Kaiser Family Foundation asked respondents to name the top two issues presidential candidates should talk about. Health care, cited by 21 percent of survey participants, was the top domestic issue, second only to the war in Iraq, named by 43 percent of the respondents.

Immigration was cited as one of two top issues by 18 percent of respondents, followed by the economy (13 percent), gas prices (12 percent) and terrorism/national security (7 percent).

The margin of error for the Kaiser study was plus or minus 3 percentage points.