Taxpayers Bankroll Smoking in Youth-Oriented Movies

UCSF report reveals $830 million in 2008 tax subsidies went to films blamed for recruiting new teen smokers

OAKLAND — University of California, San Francisco, health researchers today published a report showing that 60 percent of the $1.4 billion a year that states offer to attract film productions go to the type of films blamed for recruiting half of new teen smokers.

States hand out $500 million to help make top-grossing youth-rated films with smoking, the report’s authors estimate using 2008 data. Another $330 million in subsidies goes to R-rated films with tobacco. The $830 million total surpasses the $719 million that all states spent on tobacco prevention programs in 2009.

“For most of the last eight decades, the tobacco industry paid off Hollywood to promote smoking,” says UCSF Professor of Medicine Stanton Glantz, co-author of the report. “Now the taxpayers are bankrolling Hollywood to make the movies proven to hook hundreds of thousands of new teen smokers each year.”

As an example, the report cites The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, released by Time Warner. Its producers reportedly reaped $27 million in taxpayer-funded givebacks for shooting the heavy-smoking PG-13 movie in Louisiana.

“As California, New York, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois and dozens of other states budget more to help Hollywood than to keep kids from starting to smoke,” Glantz says. “These film subsidies undermine their own anti-tobacco programs.”

The report estimates that 1.3 million current teens smokers were recruited to smoke by watching films with smoking and about 400,000 of them will ultimately die from tobacco-induced diseases. The report recommends that youth-rated films with smoking be made ineligible for subsidies, that applicants for subsidies file affidavits that the tobacco depictions in any film have not been influenced “for a consideration,” and that the film subsidy programs be made more transparent.

The report, which covers 41 states, is available at eScholarship, the University of California’s open access digital publishing platform:
www.escholarship.org/uc/item/8nc8422j. This work was funded by the American Legacy Foundation.

UCSF’s Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education sponsors the Smokefree Movies initiative. Its internationally-endorsed policy proposals include: R-rating future movies with smoking; showing strong anti-smoking PSAs before any film with smoking; certification of no payoffs in the production and distribution chain; and an end to tobacco brand display in films.

www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu

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