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## News Release

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# NMCC and UMPI student health centers launch first-of-its-kind project in state to help students quit smoking

**Aroostook County --** A pilot project launched on the campuses of Central Aroostook's two public institutions of higher learning to help students quit smoking is being tested as a model for possible implementation at colleges and universities across Maine.

The student health centers at the University of Maine at Presque Isle and Northern Maine Community College, working through the Partnership for a Tobacco-Free Maine, are the first in the state to offer free nicotine replacement medication to those who utilize the campus health services. The initiative, which gets underway this month, will be monitored over the next year by the Partnership and the Maine College Health Association to see if it should be expanded.

Linda Mastro, the nurse practitioner who runs the health centers at both NMCC and UMPI, was a key advocate for the two campuses taking the lead on the project and worked closely with the Partnership to make it happen.

"Students frequently come in and talk about wanting to stop smoking. Up until this point, I'd have to call the Maine Tobacco Hotline, which is operated by the Partnership, or have the students call the toll free number themselves. If we were unable to get through or the student waited to make the call, it would often end there with no follow-up," said Mastro. "When the time is right you want to capture the moment. You don't want the desire to quit to wane. Under this trial program I will be able to help the student begin the process immediately."

The medication voucher program provides up to eight weeks of the nicotine patch, nicotine lozenge, nicotine gum or a combination thereof to those students who are eligible and are motivated to quit. Under the new arrangement, Mastro will fax a specially developed prescription form to a local pharmacy after meeting with the student to best determine what level and form of nicotine replacement is needed. The student can then immediately pick up the prescription at the pharmacy and begin to use the product.

“My intent is to meet with the smoker regularly to provide encouragement. If I provide them with nicotine replacement initially on a two week basis and follow up with them as they continue on the road to quitting, I can help them along the way. I can also adjust the nicotine replacement accordingly as they move forward to help ensure success,” said Mastro.

“This will be a great opportunity for students to be able to obtain nicotine replacement within 48 hours of meeting with the nurse on campus to support their quit attempt. It has been shown that a combination of counseling and nicotine replacement therapy increases quit rates,” said Carol Bell, project director for Healthy Aroostook, a project of the Aroostook County Action Program. “The Nicotine medication voucher program gives quick and easy access right on the college campus to tobacco users who don’t have insurance or insurance that does not cover nicotine replacement therapy.”

Statistics show overall smoking rates have decreased significantly in Maine over the past several years, however, the rate of smoking for young adults age 18 through 24 (the traditional college student age) continues to hover around 29 percent. Surveys also indicate that three out of every four smokers wants to quit. According to Bell, the new program will make it easier for students at both colleges to receive support through counseling and nicotine replacement therapy more quickly to make them successful in their quit attempt.

Mastro sees the timing of the introduction of the program at NMCC and UMPI as ideal, shortly after the beginning of the New Year and within sight of graduation for some students on both of the campuses.

“There are many students who may have tried to quit as a New Year’s resolution and have not succeeded or wanted to stop smoking but didn’t for whatever reason. I have also found over the years at both campuses that many students want to quit smoking before they move on and start their new careers. Last year, I had a group of four students come to me just before graduation wanting to quit. Trying to get the necessary forms and get them going on nicotine replacement didn’t happen in time. Had I had access to the materials when they inquired, things would have been different,” said Mastro.

In addition to offering nicotine replacement directly through the campus health centers at UMPI and NMCC, Mastro plans to launch a “Leave the Pack Behind” awareness campaign on both campuses this semester. She also hopes to start a noontime support group for students who want to quit.

After a year, the pilot project will be evaluated by both Mastro and the Partnership to assess whether it should be expanded to other Maine colleges and universities.

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*Northern Maine Community College nursing student Charles Zappone of Woodland and liberal studies student Tina Dorr of Ashland meet with nurse practitioner Linda Mastro, director of the NMCC and UMPI Student Health Centers. Dorr will participate in the new smoking cessation pilot project that Mastro has arranged for both UMPI and NMCC. Zappone is among a handful of NMCC nursing students that have participated in a tobacco prevention training program. The students are assisting Mastro and their fellow students interested in quitting.*