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Testimony in Opposition to the Governor's Mitigation Bill
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My name is Dr. Pat Checko. I am Chairman of the statewide MATCH Coalition (Mobilizing Against Tobacco for Connecticut's Health) and a member of The Tobacco and Health Trust Fund Board of Trustees. MATCH is opposed to the Governor's proposal to use $5 million from the Tobacco and Health Trust Fund principal for the most recent mitigation plan for FY 2010.

The Appropriations Committee is aware that in the 2009 legislative session $41.6 million was transferred from the THTF to the general fund. Of these monies, $21.6 million was appropriated for mitigation of the FY 2009 budget and the additional $20 million was allocated for the 2010-2011 biennial budget. The current balance in the fund is $5.3 million.

The THTF Board and our residents appreciate the funds that we have been able to allocate for tobacco prevention and cessation programs. These programs have had a significant impact on increasing the number of smokers who successfully quit and reducing the number of people, particularly children, who start. The fragile network that has been developed will come crashing down if the Tobacco and Health Trust Fund disappears.

I am here to ask that you not let that happen. In 2003 the THTF was "cleaned out" to plug budget deficits. It was four years before there was enough money in the fund to recommend even a modest distribution of $100,000. If it is swept again, it may never come back.

We are certainly aware of the dire economic state of our economy and of the deficit. Since it was established the THTF has received $161 million in transfers from the Tobacco Settlement Fund and $101.8 million (63.2%) has gone back in the General Fund. Even with the $13.3 million that the legislature has allowed us to spend in the past two years, only 9.6% of the fund has been spent on tobacco prevention, cessation and control.

While it is our hope that the THTF will be spared from the mitigation axe, if the money must be swept, we ask that it be spent on something other than paying old debt. It would be somewhat more palatable if it were spent to provide the seed money for Medicaid coverage of smoking cessation, as a last resort to provide this benefit to those who need it most and, who pay the high cigarette taxes with no ability to get help to stop their tobacco addiction in return.