



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 13, 2010

Mass. Would Force Retailers to Display Graphic Anti-smoking Signs

The federal agencies distributing money under the massive economic stimulus program certainly have some interesting and imaginative ways to create jobs. One of them is to help the state of Massachusetts force retailers who sell cigarettes to display signs with graphic anti-smoking images or pay fines of up to \$300.



Images of darkened lungs, damaged brains, and diseased teeth may appear on signs located next to tobacco stands or cash registers in more than 9,000 convenience stores, pharmacies, and gas stations if the plan is approved, as expected, by a vote of the state's Public Health council in August, the *Boston Globe* reported today. While some convenience stores may resent the government requirement for more health-warning signs in their already-crowded places of business, at least the state won't require the store owners to buy them. Money for the signs will come from the \$316,000 in federal stimulus money that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have committed to the campaign, "which will allow the state to provide the materials to retailers without cost," the *Globe* reported.

And because the posters will be produced by outside vendors, the spending conforms to the intent of the stimulus law, a spokeswoman for the Department of Public Health said, by creating jobs in a weak economy.

If that were true, we could solve the unemployment problem — or at least put a pretty sizable dent in it — rather easily by spending whatever portion of the \$792 billion in stimulus money the Congress approved on signs for every cause and campaign imaginable. Then we could create still more jobs by contracting with environmental groups to remove all the government signs that are littering every highway and roadside in America. In reality, all those dollars going to the sign vendors would otherwise go into other enterprises, including those private citizens support of their own free will, creating just as many, if not more, jobs. But that money, then, would not be spent in a way the government approves, in an effort to convince you to protect your health.

The requirement would place the anti-smoking signs within two feet of a tobacco display or cash



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register, depending on whether or not the storeowner keeps all the cigarettes behind the counter. Retailers who refuse to display the signs would face fines of \$100 to \$300. Retailers are already required to post signs carrying verbal warnings about the dangers of smoking and Jon Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts, wonders how many more signage requirements state agencies might come up with.

"Do you really have to have additional graphic signage and multiple layers of it at each cash register?" Hurst asked. "If you warn on everything, those warnings become essentially meaningless," he told the *Globe*. They already have signage on alcohol, tobacco, lottery, they have signage on price accuracy."

Massachusetts would become the first state to force retailers to display the graphic warnings, but the campaign is patterned after a similar effort in New York city. "There's a large body of evidence showing these graphic images are very effective," Anne Pearson, an attorney with that city's Bureau of Traffic Control, said. "They can communicate information in a way that text just can't and they can also communicate a message to people regardless of their level of literacy and regardless of the language they speak."

Then again, maybe not. The signs do contain some words to go along with the visuals-words like "Smoking Causes Lung Cancer," "Smoking Causes Tooth Decay," etc. It may be a challenge to get those signs in enough languages to meet the needs of the state's linguistically diverse population. Perhaps more stimulus money can be found to pay for translations — or better yet, to hire interpreters to stand in each store relaying the message to non-English speaking people.

Time was when a storeowner could choose what kind of signs he wanted to display in his place of business, and they would usually be, not surprisingly, messages to promote his products. Now the state forces him to display the state's messages and claims to be doing him a favor by not requiring him to pay for the signs.

Whatever messages those portray, and in whatever language appears on them, the message is not written in the language of freedom.



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