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Mothers say a nickel can fight addiction

Parent group rallies at Statehouse seeking an alcohol tax dedicated to drug treatment

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Louise Habicht stood up and listed the names of those who died, starting with her own son John.

She cited Rick, Mark, Andy, Cindy, Stewart, Dennis. The names continued.

Each was a young person -- some were teenagers -- who died in New Jersey as a result of drug addiction. Habicht came home one day in 2000 to find her son dead at the age 29.

"I tried to get him treatment. I would be on the phone. But there were waiting lists and we had no insurance," she recalled.

Habicht of West Deptford joined a dozen other mothers at the Statehouse in Trenton yesterday to kickoff the Just a Nickel Campaign (www.justanickel.org). The effort seeks a nickel tax on every gallon of alcohol sold in the state to raise money for drug treatment and addiction prevention.

The tax would raise \$10 million each year and pay for 3,800 new treatment slots, said the mothers, who have formed a group called the Parent to Parent Coalition. They have collected more than 100 obituaries and news articles of people who died from addiction, usually from drug overdoses. Some struggling with addiction died in car crashes or committed suicide. Many died in their 20s and 30s, though the collection included obituaries for a 13-year-old and a 56-year-old.

The mothers told harrowing stories.

Kathleen Dobbs of Barrington nailed the windows of her home shut when she could not get her son, 16 years old at the time, into treatment. She made him sleep on a sleeping bag on her bedroom floor, fearful he

would go out at night looking for drugs. She had health insurance, but her plan covered little.

She finally called the White House, which put her in touch with state officials who found her son a slot in Paterson, where he completed a long-term program. She said he is now in his 20s and doing well.

"I was losing my son. I knew if he did not die he would end up in jail," she said.

New Jersey already has an excise tax on alcohol: 12 cents per gallon for beer; 70 cents per gallon for wine, and \$4.40 a gallon for spirits. The tax has not increased since 1992, according to Daniel J. Meara, a spokesman the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence - NJ, which is supporting the coalition's effort.

So far, the coalition has no legislators on board, and none attended yesterday's news conference. Contacted yesterday, Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex) chairman of the Senate health and human services committee, said he will look at the proposal.

"This is certainly worth exploring," Vitale said. "There is not nearly enough treatment for the uninsured and underinsured."

Assemblyman Herb Conaway (D-Burlington), chairman of the Assembly health and senior services committee, also will look at the proposal, a spokesman said. So will Gov. Jon Corzine.

"We must get our fiscal house in order so that proposals like these can be honestly evaluated and considered," a spokesman for the governor said.

The executive director of the New Jersey Licensed Beverage Associations, which represents establishments that sell alcohol, said liquor already is heavily taxed in New Jersey.

"Just what we need is another tax," said Lewis Rothbart. "Half the cost of a bottle of liquor is basically tax. ... There is an awful lot of money out there right now for drug and alcohol treatment."

He noted, however, that the proposed increase is small. "If it's going to a good cause we will probably end up supporting it," he said.