

AN EDUCATION ON PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

In September 2014, Bill Manov, Ph.D., director of Santa Cruz County's Drug and Alcohol Program, and Brenda Armstrong, prevention program manager, informed League members about the County Health Services Agency's strategic planning efforts related to prevention, intervention, and treatment of substance abuse.

Armstrong's main purview is stopping substance abuse where it starts. The federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), identifies substance abuse and addiction as the number one health problem in the nation. Ten years ago, they began to identify what long-term changes in communities create an environment that discourages substance abuse.

SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) develops comprehensive systems, based on public health research, to help create healthy communities where people enjoy a quality life at work, in school, and at home, with support from communities and neighborhoods where they have connections with families and friends in a drug- and crime-free environment.

CSAP first defines what problems in the community need to be addressed and how to effectively implement strategies to eliminate them. By limiting access and availability of drugs and alcohol and changing social norms, we can delay the age of onset (which makes it less likely they will become addicted) and reduce negative impacts of drinking.

Santa Cruz County's top three substance abuse problems are alcohol, marijuana, and prescription drugs. Youth surveys report that in our county they have easy access to these substances, and that our culture normalizes and encourages their use. Early use affects youth at a time when their brains can be most affected, and addiction, a form of learning, creates life-long habits that can later become a major problem. Our county ranks high in the state in teen alcohol use, and youths admit that they find it easy to access alcohol.

One strategy to delay onset addresses the unsuccessful practice of five-day school suspensions where the child, often sent home to spend the time without parental supervision, has unstructured free time and becomes disconnected from school. Instead, the proposed program encourages substituting a contract to attend an eight-week class where the student learns discipline and receives academic assistance. Rather than simply isolating the student, this program seeks to engage them with positive influences, such as sports and other activities.

The Community United to Reduce Bingeing project (Project CURB project-curb.org) spreads awareness about the growing problem of binge drinking (defined as four or more drinks in two hours) in Santa Cruz County (SCC), which affects almost 50% of Santa Cruz teens. Project CURB aims to reduce youth access to alcohol by creating change in the community. Binge drinking increases incidences of driving under the influence, rape and unsafe, unplanned sexual activity, alcohol-related crimes, and alcohol-related injuries or poisoning.

Project CURB focuses on merchants to encourage stricter enforcement of laws against selling alcohol to minors. Out of 122 retail outlets receiving compliance checks, 24 percent sold alcohol to youth decoys. Other strategies include clearing windows of posters and other materials allows better visibility for law enforcement, designing stores to discourage loitering, and elimination of prominent displays of small-sized alcohol bottles next to candy and soda. Communities have successfully used social host ordinances that hold property owners responsible for underage drinking on their property to create safer neighborhoods.

Alcohol licensing and permits can also play a part in preventing underage access by not oversaturating the area with too many liquor licenses and putting stronger conditions on usage to limit hours of operation.

The alcoholic beverage industry spends billions of dollars on advertising and products that target youth. Alcohol ads promote drinking as fun, entertaining, and sexy. Alchopops, beverages formulated to taste and look like soda pop in order to appeal to youths, have a higher alcohol content than beer. Energy drink manufacturers now produce versions of their drinks that contain alcohol in addition to large amounts of caffeine and package them in containers indistinguishable from the non-alcohol versions popular with teens.

Project CURB also seeks to educate adults about restricting teen access to alcohol. This means never providing underage drinkers with alcohol or condoning underage drinking in your home as well as modeling drinking in moderation.

With marijuana use widely accepted in SCC and marijuana products easily available, teens may easily see smoking pot as a harmless practice. In fact, those who begin smoking marijuana in their teens can permanently lose cognitive abilities, as brain development continues into early adulthood. With some varieties of marijuana now containing higher levels of the main psychoactive ingredient (tetrahydrocannabinol), addiction to marijuana is becoming a major problem. Restricting the number of marijuana dispensaries and monitoring existing ones as well as using policies to restrict recreational marijuana use in public spaces can help control this problem.

Prescription opiate drugs, easily come by in medicine cabinets at home or in a friend's home, can be controlled by reducing over-prescriptions and by proper disposal of drugs at free collection sites throughout the county (a list of current collection sites can be found at sharpmedsolutions.org/collection_sites) where the drugs will be incinerated. Never flush unused drugs of any kind because they will contaminate groundwater. Voluntary prescription tracking systems, effective in reducing prescription drug abuse, continue to be underutilized by physicians.

While Armstrong aims to prevent new cases of substance abuse, Manov helps those who have substance use disorders (SUD). SCC has an 8 percent incidence of SUD in the population, compared to 7.2 percent statewide, with alcohol the most frequently abused substance. Those with SUD continue to use despite personal problems and tend to develop a tolerance that leads to increased use and needing stronger substances to achieve the same effect. SUD occurs at all levels of society and often appears to be, and is accepted as, normal social behavior.

SUD costs SCC over \$206 million annually. Health care accounts for the largest share at 55 percent, or \$115 million. Criminal justice and social services come in at 23 percent (\$49 million), followed by property damage (9.2 percent, or \$19 million) and car crashes (8.7 percent, or \$18 million). Substance abuse treatment and prevention makes up the remaining 3.3 percent at only \$6.8 million.

With every dollar spent on treatment saving between four and seven dollars in health care,

criminal justice, child welfare, and other public costs, treatment provides a significant return on investment. Unfortunately, at current funding levels, the county currently serves less than half the number of persons seeking treatment. While most of those dealing with SUD don't seek treatment, those that do ask for help during an acute crisis will go back to old habits if they do not receive treatment within two to three days. The current model is acute-care driven, with not enough resources to provide the help needed to maintain gains for the long term.

Treating SUD as a chronic disorder requiring ongoing recovery, maintenance, and monitoring means matching the level of care to the current level of need (by not under-treating or stopping treatment before the process is complete), as well as providing integrated treatment for co-occurring mental health disorders. In addition to providing adequate treatment, the strategic planning process begins by recommending educating the community about these needs and providing accurate information to reduce the stigma of SUD.

Accomplishing the first goal means increasing the availability of services (through new funding from the Affordable Care Act, MediCal expansion, and other means) and improving the quality of services. Once those goals are met, we will see benefits through reduced costs to individuals, families, and the community.

Instead of jailing offenders for use or possession, Manov supports diverting them from the criminal justice system into treatment. This has worked well with the Serial Inebriates Program (SIP) which offers those arrested repeatedly for public drunkenness the alternative of treatment instead of jail time. It's better and cheaper to treat than to jail.

Both Manov and Armstrong emphasized the need for support from the League and our community. More importantly, we can become educated and involved, and help spread accurate information about substance abuse prevention and treatment in our county.

—Pam Newbury, VOTER Editor

This article was originally published in the October, 2014 issue of the Santa Cruz VOTER newsletter.