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'All hands on deck' in Valpo to fight city's drug problem

City commits \$100,000 to eight education initiatives

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December 2, 2009

BY TERESA AUCH SCHULTZ, (219) 648-3120

Valparaiso will budget \$100,000 to help support a group of new initiatives - including a nationally known program for students and drop-off locations for extra prescription drugs - to help fight the city's continuing drug problem.

Mayor Jon Costas announced the programs Tuesday to a crowd that filled the commissioners chamber at the Porter County Administration Building. Along with the \$100,000, Costas said, officials also hope to raise \$50,000 in donations.

"We're at a point where it's all hands on deck to take on this issue," Costas said.

The money, which will come from the County Economic Development Income Tax, will support eight programs that will focus on education. Costas said that while enforcement and treatment are also important, he felt those were best left to the county and professional not-for-profit groups, respectively.

One of the main programs is Life Skills training, which will be first presented to students as young as 8 years old at the Valparaiso Parks Department, Valparaiso Family YMCA and the Boys & Girls Club. It will be taught to all students in the Valparaiso middle school students. Rocco Schiralli, executive director of Porter-Starke Services, praised the program, saying that unlike many other drug prevention and education programs, Life Skills had 30 published studies showing that it works.

The city will keep track of the program and report its status to a national database, which, after three years, will let Valparaiso know whether the program is working.

Other initiatives the city is funding include a full-time police officer at Valparaiso High School, court referrals for at-risk families to the Strengthening Families Program as the Family and Youth Services Bureau and locations where adults can take left-over prescription drugs. Costas said it's important for parents to not leave drugs such as Vicodin and OxyContin in their homes where teenagers have easy access to them. A city task force will form in a month to keep track of how the programs are doing.

The mayor said the city would use its Web site and newsletter to let citizens people know about the programs, along with advertising on city trucks.

Mary Hodson, executive director of the Porter County branch of Mental Health America, praised the city's collaboration with Porter-Starke and other groups in coming up with the programs. Everyone has a strength, Hodson said, and by working together they can coordinate their efforts.

"Thank God our our heads have been pulled out of the sand," she said.

Schiralli said the next step is getting more resources so that the programs can be expanded.

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