

Driven to safety: CTC aims to reduce risk factors for area teens

Published: Sunday, May 09, 2010

[No comments posted.](#) | [Email to a friend](#) | [Print version](#) | [ShareThis](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)

By MELISSA BROOKS
Times Herald Staff



[Click to enlarge](#)

School's (almost) out for summer, and as kids anticipate an extended vacation, parents need to be mindful of the risk factors summer freedom can bring.

That's the message Norristown Area Communities That Care For Youth (CTC), a coalition dedicated to reducing those risk factors that could lead to adolescent drug use and violence and enhancing protective factors that shield them from such problems wants to get across.

CTC Community Mobilizer Angela Bell said with all the free time kids have during summer months — especially with both parents working, as is often the case — they're "more susceptible to peer pressure and more likely to make bad choices.

"If parents are mindful of that, they can try to do whatever they can to engage their children and teens in pro-social activities through the summer," Bell said. "Tap the local resources, and find out what's available in your community."

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) has supported CTC for more than a decade, and more than 100 communities have been trained in this research-driven model.

The Evidence Based Prevention and Intervention Support Center (EPIS Center) in State College, funded by PCCD and the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, directs outreach and advocacy efforts, provides technical assistance to communities and conducts original research to promote the use of prevention and intervention programs proven effective through scientific studies.

Brian Bumbarger, director of the EPIS Center, said, "One of the important risk factors for delinquency or youth drug use is poor parental supervision. And so especially when kids are at that early adolescent time when their parents become less of an influence on them and peers become more of an influence on them, it's really important to make sure there are good, positive pro-social things for kids to do in the summertime, and to make sure there is adult supervision and guidance.

"It's not just about keeping kids busy; it's about keeping them busy and at the same time doing things that instill positive values in them."

Bell, who's been the Norristown CTC's mobilizer since its August 2001 inception, said, "We have a combination of program and environmental strategies working toward the same goal: preventing delinquent behavior." Program strategies include in-classroom life skills training, provided to fifth- through eighth-graders in Norristown Area School District, as part of their health curriculum; and nighttime parent education classes offered in conjunction with Family Services, CTC's lead agency.

As an environmental strategy, about two years ago CTC and Family Services launched the "Find Your 25th Hour" social marketing campaign to encourage parents "to understand and think about how important spending time with their kids can be as far as keeping their kids safe and drug free," Bell said.

"All parents, regardless of economic status or race, are up against time. If you think about the various times during the day when you can talk to your kids, it adds up to that elusive 25th hour we all wish we had. And if you utilize those times to talk to because negative influences are being removed from their communities.

According to Norristown Police Department Detective Lt. Kevin McKeon, this police detail targets street-level drug dealers who often deal illegal narcotics to children. Embedding patrols in problem areas where youth frequent, he said, cuts down on the chances a juvenile "could be led astray." These drug patrols resulted in 78 arrests between December 2008 and July 2009, according to McKeon.

Parents should also be aware of the nighttime curfew enforced in the municipality between 10:30 p.m. and 6:30 a.m. on weekdays and midnight and 6 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, McKeon said.

CTC's strategies are dictated by local data proven through research to be associated with delinquency, violence, substance use, school failure and dropout. "In order to reduce adolescent delinquent behavior," Bell said, "we must first be aware of the most pressing risk factors in the community that cause kids to choose delinquent behaviors."

In an ongoing attempt to curb bad behaviors, a Risk and Resource Assessment is conducted in NASD and the greater community that identifies specific risk factors. From the information gathered, CTC selects a few top priorities, Bell said, and seeks evidence-based strategies to address them.

"We just completed (a risk assessment) and have four priority risk factors we're focusing on: availability of drugs and fire arms, family management, lack of commitment to school, and alienation and rebelliousness."

After directing prevention resources to particular areas for two-to-three years, Bell said, CTC then collects new data and reassesses the community's risk and protective factors.

Without an initiative like CTC utilizing evidence-based programs, Bumbarger said, "a lot of money is otherwise wasted on things that don't work, or directed to things that aren't the root of the problem.

"For example, a community could have 80 percent of its high school students regularly binge drinking, and no one's doing anything about it. Then maybe there's one heroin overdose, and all of a sudden a lot of resources are directed to that, because it's more dramatic."

According to the EPIS Center, research studies conducted both in Pennsylvania and nationally have demonstrated CTC is effectively creating population-level public health improvement, reducing delinquency and youth drug use and improving academic achievement for youth in the communities it's present.

"We have some strategies in Pennsylvania that have been proven effective in reducing youth crime and drug use and at the same time improving academic achievement," Bumbarger said. "That's a great thing — except that since 2002, the funding level for those two initiatives (CTC and evidence based programs) in Pennsylvania has been cut by 93 percent."

In 2002 these initiatives received about \$17 million dollars from the state. By last year that figure was reduced to \$3 million. For 2011 it's proposed by and Gov. Ed Rendell and the House of Representatives to drop this funding by another 67 percent, Bumbarger said, bringing it down to just over \$1 million.

"There are a number of community coalitions that have completely disintegrated, because there's no funding for the community mobilization that needs to take place; they just fell apart. These initiatives operate on shoe string budget already, so when times get tough,

they're the first things to get cut — even though they're some of the most important things in a community."

Kelly Brown of Family Services said Norristown Area CTC has "been very fortunate to have an engaged and active board (that helps) ... keep these efforts going."

She said with the impact of state budget cuts, CTC has primarily relied on federal Drug Free Communities funds to stay afloat, but it's the coalition's determination to secure a diversification of funding — a mixture of state, federal and local — that she attributes to their survival in tough economic times.

"Everybody understands we need to make cuts," Bumbarger said, "but it doesn't make sense to cut the things that have been proven effective in changing something that actually saves taxpayer dollars (reducing crime).

"It's the worst possible timing to be cutting prevention ... because the very things that we know are at the root of youth delinquency, violence, drug use and school failure are the things that are going to get worse, because our economy is so bad," Bumbarger said.

"When families are out of work and struggling, it opens the door to lots of things that can drive kids into bad decision making and bad choices, and down a road that leads them to be unproductive citizens. When families are stressed out about paying the bills, they're not as focused on doing what they need to do to make sure they have a strong family that communicates.

"The impact of our economy on families is really going to put us at greater risk for increasing levels of crime and drug use," he continued. "This is the very time we need to be investing more in strengthening families and strengthening communities."

Norristown Area CTC is in the beginning stages of creating a new campaign based on debunking the myths surrounding marijuana, Bell said. A billboard is expected to be erected on Markley Street by August or September.

"With everything in the media about marijuana being used for medicinal purposes, people wanting to make it legal and also kids seeing family members who use marijuana without consequence, we have to counter these attitudes," Bell said. "Children are getting the message that marijuana is not a problem, and we want to say: 'No, it is a problem. This is a drug, it's illegal and it's not something you want to engage in.'"

Bell said that while much can be accomplished in a classroom, it's not the curriculum-based programming CTC counts on to make change. "If you send kids (from the classroom) back into an environment and they're still exposed to the same negative influences, you'll only get so far. We always try to change the environment our kids are growing up in, so whatever changes we're able to make are long-lasting."

As summer approaches, Bell wants parents to recognize that "the value of education goes beyond the school year. "When you plant that seed of how important their education is, it will impact how they look at themselves and how they view their decision making. If they value education and are faced with peer pressure, they'll make smarter choices."

CTC and Family Services, in partnership with the Greater Norristown Police Athletic League, sponsor a youth subcommittee called Back Talk that meets twice a month at PAL to engage in positive social activities. Interested NASD youth in middle school or high school should contact Family Services at 610-630-2111, and ask for Cassandra Iannetta or Mary Bell, co-facilitators.