

Substance Abuse Prevention Part 2: The Efforts

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Part 1 reviewed the results of a countywide survey related to teen drug and alcohol use. [The article and survey results can be found here.](#)

LANESBOROUGH, Mass. — The Berkshire district attorney's office is now training educators on a specific curriculum to prevent drug use.

The office's grant-funded Community Outreach and Education Program is now teaching "Life Skills," a three-pronged approach to help students make better decisions when presented with drug use. The curriculum is eyed to be rolled out into all schools and help prevent students from going down the path of drug use.

"The Life Skills Program in itself has three components, teaching general social skills, personal skills, as well as drug abuse resistance. It hits decision making and it starts off in most levels — high schools are a little bit different — the elementary and middle school levels start off with self-esteem," said Kim Blair of the district attorney's office.

The office piloted the program in Lee Elementary last year and it is being replicated in other schools. The next step for the district attorney's office staff to training the educators who are in the school every day to re-enforce the program.

"One of the things we will be doing is training educators. We've forecasted a number of trainings to train educators throughout Berkshire County in all levels of the life skills program," Blair said.

The curriculum has multiple levels for different age groups. Real-life scenarios are presented to students to determine what they would do — practice of the skills they've learned for when it happens in real life. Blair said the scenarios replicate what a student could encounter, particularly when it comes to drug or alcohol use.

"Refusals go from no I don't want to do it to do I have to tell a little white lie? Do I have to pretend my parents are coming to pick me up? Do I just ignore them?" Blair said. "We talk them through a lot of different ways to refuse and to deal with situations in their lives."

Concurrently, the district attorney's office has a peer-mentoring program. The Youth Advisory Board is an annual program that brings students from across the county to put on the Strive Leadership Conference. That conference has workshops and speakers that span issues many students are worried about — not just drug or alcohol use but other youth issues.

The Brien Center staff is trained in the Life Skills Program but also brings other efforts into the schools.

"We are in all schools middle and high schools in the county. We are funded through a series of grants. We have three levels, almost four levels, of services we provide. Prevention, similar to Life Skills and we did get trained in Life Skills, we also do a couple other different programs similar to Life Skills — Project Alert and Project Toward No Drug Abuse," said James Mucia, division director of child and adolescent services of the Brien Center.

The first level of service for the Brien Center is to teach those similar curricula. Secondly, the center offers in-school counseling.

"We do a significant amount of school-based counseling, individual and group. One of the things we've found with kids, and it goes back to the progression of the disease when kids first start using, they're kind of having a great time. They haven't really crashed. It is, later on, they seek out treatment," Mucia said. "We have an adolescent clinic. We provide clinic-based services, therapy, evidence-based approaches in substance use. But we don't get a lot of referrals."

So instead the Brien Center operates in every school in the county. The focus is to be flexible and meet the young people where they are.

"We need to be in the schools because that is where the kids are," Mucia said

The center hopes to build a trusted relationship with the students. And when needed it implements the Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach.

"ACRA tries to use the environmental around a particular youth to reinforce positive behaviors. I always use this example, somebody might be talented in sports and start using. The ACRE approach you find ways for his parents, maybe his coach, maybe his teacher, to go to baseball practice every day. We know if they go to baseball practice every day they are much less likely to use, and thus decrease the use," Mucia said.

Mucia said the center is providing both prevention curriculum and then the next level of service for those who had their first use of drugs or alcohol. Mucia said while that is more of an intervention, it does prevent further drug use.

The efforts in the schools are all part of curbing drug behavior. Those two organizations presented their work to the Central County Rx/Heroin Work Group. The young students typically aren't wrapped into the opioid crisis with very few actually reporting having addictions. But, by curbing the use of alcohol and drugs at the school level is what the program operators say will help prevent the student from delving into the harder drugs in the future.

Mucia says what is helping is the state's law requiring nurses to perform drug screenings. Mucia said the questionnaire screenings have already led to an identification of students who are at risk of falling into drug use.

"I think it is a great thing," he said.

Pittsfield's Health Director Gina Armstrong said city schools implemented it this year and it did lead to some referrals for treatment. The questionnaire focuses on indicators of risk and from there, educators and parents can focus on an individual student.

"They didn't see it as an intimidating process at all," Armstrong said of the students taking the screening.

But, there is an option for both parents and students to opt out of the questionnaire. At Taconic High School, 26 percent of students opted out. The screenings have been paying dividends in other schools in Berkshires, Mucia said, and even if all students aren't taking it, the screenings are doing some good and worth the effort.

Meanwhile, the Berkshire United Way has its own efforts to prevent drug abuse. Those include parenting workshops, awareness programs, and a social norms marketing campaign promoting positive decisions.

Between the various organizations and the schools themselves, there is much effort being placed on prevention. And the numbers are trending in the right direction, but there is still more work to be done.

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