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Positive trends seen with regional program to cut substance abuse

BY RUTH EPSTEIN REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

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SALISBURY – Northwest Corner organizations have come together to seek solutions to the increasing problem of substance abuse. Several groups have, in fact, developed an initiative that is already seeing some positive results.

The Botvin Life Skills Program was described to a host of local residents during an event held at the Hotchkiss School's Fairfield Farm on Saturday.

The Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation's Northwest Corner Fund and the Foundation for Community Health, under the leadership of the McCall Center for Behavioral Health, invested in two strategies to address what they see as a crisis affecting families and communities in the region.

The program is now entering its fourth year. Participants are students in grades six, seven and eight who follow a curriculum that provides confidence, knowledge and resilience to deal with social and psychological factors that cause risky behavior.

Instructors also outline the dangers of alcohol, narcotics and vaping. According to those involved, Botvin has reduced drug use by up to 75%, alcohol use by up to 60% and aggressive behavior by up to 50%. The material put out says, "In Region 1, initial surveys indicate positive trends in skills relating to relaxation, drug refusal and self-control."

In his remarks, Peter Taylor, executive director of BTCTF, spoke of the "use of the philanthropy as a force of change."

Nancy Heaton, executive director of the FCH, explained the organization, now in its 16th year, works on methods of prevention.

"Our mission is to improve the health and well being of the members of our community. We give access with an approach on collaboration."

Heaton said with the realization of the substance abuse scourge, and knowing there were not a lot of services in the area, the foundation reached out to the McCall Foundation. Its executive director Maria Coutant Skinner, a licensed clinical social worker, said she was delighted to be able to sit around a table with a group of others and design a program.

Using graphs projected on a screen, Coutant Skinner gave grim statistics about the devastation substance abuse reaps on families. She also noted the long time it takes to turn around an epidemic. "We were seeing an uptake in suicides and asked ourselves what can we do, where do we go and what is the answer?"

They sought to find the root causes of the risky behavior. Childhood trauma is key, including divorce, being raised by a family member with addiction and issues or witnessing domestic violence. She used the example of a person with a great deal of emotional pain taking medication for the extraction of a wisdom tooth and the dangers that can result. She also noted that prolonging age of first use helps in combating substance abuse.

She said prevention and treatment are worthwhile investments and early identification of risk factors can change the trajectory of someone's whole life. "Disconnect leads to pain and to addiction," she said. "Connecting is the solution to changing communities. It is happening here and it gives me great hope."

Dita Bhargava gave a solemn talk about her son Alec who died at age 23 in Canaan last year as a result of a seven-year struggle with substance abuse. He started self-medicating in high school.

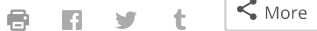
She said more could have been done to help him, pointing to the current lack of societal structure, the scourge of illicit fentanyl and the absence of preventive measures throughout his life. She said there is still a stigma associated with the disease.

Bhargava is now an ambassador for Shatterproof, a national nonprofit dedicated to ending the devastation addiction causes families.

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