

For starters, she doesn't seem to be a big believer in the zero tolerance strategy that is so popular these days with schools and police in New Hampshire. "I'm not going to be able to stop kids from experimenting," she told me. "The important thing is for kids to realize what the dangers are and give them the tools to make informed decisions.

"Many adults and youths don't realize the ramifications. If you start using alcohol at 14 or 15, your chances of becoming an alcoholic are greatly increased."

I not only like Hennig's approach, but I think her background will prove beneficial. Hennig spent 20 years in the Navy, retiring as a lieutenant commander. She and her husband, also a Navy veteran, have three children. After being stationed across the United States and overseas, this is Hennig's first stab at small-town living.

She doesn't have preconceived notions about what can and can't be done. "We're not just throwing spaghetti at the wall," she said. "We're finding out what the issues are and how the community feels about them."

Hennig, who has been on the job since last September, started out by talking with teens, and found, "They want to be respected. They want to be valued." At Newport High and the town's teen center, she asked, "Why do kids get caught up in drugs and alcohol?"

"Why not?" they responded. "There's nothing better to do."

For a Newport High health fair, she brought along a blank piece of poster board and wrote one question across the top: "What Is Your Anti-Drug?"

On the poster, teens scribbled predictable answers — sports, music, theater. But one teen wrote, "My alcoholic mother."

It was a telling response. The sense throughout Sullivan County is that drug and alcohol abuse is being passed down from generation to generation. The challenge is to find ways to break the cycle.

Tomorrow, Newport will take the next step — teens and employers together in one room. The forum at the recreation center, 5 Belknap Ave., is scheduled from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. There will be plenty of food, which Hennig admits is part of her strategy to draw in teens. She hopes employers will not only talk about job opportunities, but be willing to consider internships and apprenticeships for interested teens.

Guenter Hubert told me that he plans to be there. His family owns Hubert's, a group of clothing stores up and down the Connecticut River that's been around for 35 years. As a business owner who depends on the local labor market to provide employees to sell his stores' shoes and stock shelves, Hubert thinks Hennig is moving in the right direction.

"The payoff isn't always going to be instantaneous," he said, "but we've got to do something to start helping these kids. There are kids in middle school who have gone beyond the experimental stage with drugs and alcohol. That's scary.

"Sometimes, (teenagers and young adults) come in looking for jobs and they're so hung over, you wonder, do they even sleep at night?"

Now that is a problem worth losing sleep over, whether you run a business or not.

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