

Parents asked to fight substance abuse

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CLAREMONT -- Parents and community leaders were asked to call their friends and neighbors and start small groups to raise awareness and begin formulating a solution to battle substance abuse and depression among Claremont and Newport youth.

They were presented with results of a substance abuse and depression survey at a town hall meeting at Stevens High School Tuesday evening that highlighted the need to discuss the issues.

The Greater Sullivan County Community Coalition, also known as Communities United For Substance Abuse Prevention surveyed students in Claremont and Newport to find out how many of them use drugs and alcohol, have experienced depression or contemplated suicide, how much of a problem it is in the area and how it might affect others. The surveys were passed out in the schools, and according to Communities United director Liz Hennig, only a small number of parents and students who didn't want to take the survey were exempt.

The five issues surveyed were use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana within a 30-day period; lifetime alcohol and drug use; depression; violence; and binge drinking. Community United's evaluator, Harry Wolhandler, presented the results of the survey: Claremont and Newport students versus state results.

According to Wolhandler's evaluation, two in five high school students had an alcoholic drink in the past 30 days, and one in 20 high school students drank at least every three days. By the ninth grade, one-third of students have had an alcoholic beverage in the past 30 days. By the 11th grade, almost half of students have. Forty percent of male students have had a drink in the past 30 days, as compared to 42 percent of females.

Results say that binge drinking is common among high school students, with one in four -- 27 percent in Claremont and Newport and 29 percent in the state -- drinking more than five drinks in a row in the past 30 days. One in 20 high school students binge drinks weekly or more often. Light binge drinking peaks in the 10th grade, with 32 percent of students having five or more drinks in one sitting in the past 30 days. Heavy binge drinking peaks in the 12th grade, with 30 percent of students binge drinking six or more times in the past 30 days, Wolhandler presented in his findings.

The largest percentage of kids -- 27 percent -- had their first alcoholic beverage between the ages of 13 and 14, according to the survey results. However, 31 percent of kids said they had never had a drink of alcohol besides just a few sips. Fifty-eight percent of kids said they had not had an alcoholic beverage in the past 30 days. Of the rest of them, 18 percent said they received an alcoholic drink from someone who gave it to them, 11 percent said they got it some other way, 10 percent said they gave someone money to buy it for them, 3 percent said they got it from a family member or store, and 1 percent said they bought it at a convenience store, grocery store, gas station or other store.

The results for Claremont and Newport students who have smoked or taken drugs were significantly lower than the state's results. However, the survey found that there are still large numbers. One in four students have smoked tobacco in the past 30 days, and one in 10 of them smoke daily. Most of these students -- 10 percent -- are in the 10th, 11th or 12th grade and are male.

One in six kids smokes marijuana, with most of them -- 12 percent -- in the 11th grade. One in 10 students smokes at least every few days. One in six students use prescription drugs for recreation, one in 10 sniffs glue or aerosol and smaller percentages of students have tried cocaine, methamphetamines, ecstasy, heroin, used needles to inject drugs or took steroids or other shots without supervision. On a positive note, "users of all substances report efforts to cut back over the past 12 months," according to the survey.

Unlike the drug and tobacco results, more Claremont and Newport students have experienced depression than the state average. Thirty percent of students (25 percent state average) have been depressed for 14 or more days in a row, 16 percent (14 percent state average) have seriously considered suicide, 12 percent have planned for suicide and eight percent have actually attempted suicide. Twice as many females than males have reported to have experienced depression, which also peaks at the 10th grade level. The results also show that students who drink alcohol are more likely to be depressed or consider suicide.

Among Claremont and Newport students, sexual activity is also common. Half of students -- 51 percent -- are sexually active, as compared with the state average of 44 percent. The highest percentage of students -- 14 percent-- engaged in sexual activity are 14-year-olds. There is a "dramatic increase," Wolhandler said, from 13 to 14 year olds in sexual activity. The survey also found that more students become sexually promiscuous when they drink.

In response to the survey findings, parents and community leaders discussed ways they could help combat the problems. Shelly Hudson, executive director of the Greater Claremont Chamber of Commerce, also runs with a nonprofit performing arts group in Newport and works with "at-risk youth" 21 years of age and younger, she said. She said the results were not surprising to her and suggested the community help kids find positive things to do with their time, such as become involved with the city's recreation programs. She added that if community organizations with the same goal of helping children band together, they can become a safety net for kids who usually fall through the cracks.

Denise Devlin, a representative of Friends of Recovery New Hampshire, said her organization received a \$6,000 public health grant and started peer-to-peer support groups, which are run by parents who have helped or are in the midst of dealing with a teen struggling with drugs, alcohol, depression or sexual activity. She said NAMI, a national mental illness support group, trains people to become group facilitators and will have its next training sessions on Aug. 2 and Aug. 23 at the NAMI offices in Concord.

Gail Kennedy, family development educator for the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, said the extension program offers support for teens and their families through programs such as Strengthening Families and its Teen Talk newsletter, which had been sent to Claremont Middle School parents. She suggested that the community survey students and ask them what types of programs or support they would like their community to provide for them.

Superintendent Jackie Guillette said the school district would work alongside the coalition to provide whatever it needs to combat the problems teens face.

Hennig said after the meeting that the coalition had a meeting with the police department and is planning a meeting on Aug. 11 with the schools and school districts to discuss the issues. The coalition hopes to reach every aspect of the community -- police, schools, parents, churches, etc. -- to communicate and form a plan to battle area kids' struggles. The state provided Sullivan County a \$230,000 grant per year for the next two to three years to work toward that goal, she said