



### **Service Population Advisory Group of the Strategic Prevention Enhancement Initiative**

*A joint project between Connecticut Youth Services Association (CYSA), East of the River Action Substance Abuse Elimination, Inc. (ERASE) and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services*

As a member of the Strategic Prevention Enhancement Consortium and a part of the Strategic Prevention Enhancement Initiative, Connecticut Youth Services Association (CYSA) was awarded a grant to facilitate the formation of the Service Population Advisory Group from the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) in Fall 2012. ERASE was named as the contractor and fiduciary. CYSA's role was to hold a Focus Group in each of the five DMHAS regions between January and June 2013. Focus Groups, CYSA tried to utilize parent community groups that already address prevention issues and provided a diverse cross section of participants.

The purpose of CYSA's involvement in the Service Population Advisory Group were three fold:

- 1) to gather parents in Focus Groups to educate and discuss ongoing prevention efforts
- 2) to review and ask for feedback on the state's five year prevention strategic plan
- 3) to identify through focus groups 2-3 parent leaders who would be willing to continue to meet and/or be available to DMHAS for ongoing input from a parental point a view regarding prevention activities in Connecticut. These parent leaders will make up the Service Population Advisory Group.

Below is a summary of the focus group feedback.

#### **Region 4 & 5 Parent Focus Groups Manchester and Waterbury**

**Summary:** Two focus groups were held on Substance Abuse Prevention initiatives. Region 4 was held in Manchester on November 29, 2012 and Region 5 was held in Waterbury on December 4, 2012. The previously existing groups were affiliated with the Youth Service Bureau in their towns. Childcare, dinner and gift cards for participation were the costs incurred in facilitating these groups. The Waterbury group was all Spanish speaking and was conducted with the assistance of two translators.

Overall themes included parents having a keen interest in their communities and in the members of those communities. They are globally unaware of prevention programming in their neighborhood, town or the school system. State level effort awareness is limited to media campaigns. They also have no knowledge of places to go as a parent for resources to assist in helping their children make good choices including not using substances. Most get their information regarding substance abuse from personal experience, family experience, friends or their own children. They are very eager to share their opinions but don't have the time to go seek out those opportunities. They greatly appreciate the opportunity to

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talk about these issues, learn something and contribute their own experiences. Two volunteered to be on a parent advisory committee to do just that.

### **Region 2 Parent Focus Group - Meriden**

**Summary:** One focus group was held on Substance Abuse Prevention initiatives on February 19, 2013. The group was Spanish speaking and affiliated with Children's First Initiative and the Meriden Family Zone – a program modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone. It was conducted with the assistance of two translators.

Overall themes included parents having a keen interest in their communities and in the members of those communities. Most get their information regarding substance abuse from personal experience, friends, internet, the Parent Group they come to or their own children. They also feel that the drug culture has diminished over the years and is not as bad as it has been in the past. They are very eager to share their opinions but don't have the time to go seek out those opportunities. They stated that school administration is approachable but have not themselves approached staff on a particular issue.

### **Region1 Parent Focus Group - New Canaan**

**Summary:** Focus Group was held on April 4, 2013. The group of parents are affiliated with the newly revived Teen Center – a hub of positive youth development and prevention activities.

Overall themes included parents being concerned about other parents encouraging or allowing for youth to drink with or without their supervision. There was frustration amongst some of the parents who were present that even though programming is offered for parents and activities are available through the teen center, the same families are often involved in that programming. As in the larger cities, there is difficulty in reaching non - participating parents. They identified the need to change the culture specifically around alcohol and felt that larger community events such as 5k road races would elevate the issue to a more broad based audience. They also felt that school personnel were approachable but that town officials were not necessarily interested in parents' concerns around these issues. They felt that a new and effective way to reach parents and youth would be through coaches, activity and club leaders and utilizing more mentoring type activities.

### **Region 3 Parent Focus Group – Mystic**

**Summary:** Focus Group was held on May 4, 2013 with parents who also work in varying aspects of the prevention and youth services field. They were all from Region 3 but from different towns throughout the region. This group was selected to gain some insight into how much more aware parents who work in the field are to the issues around substance abuse and prevention.

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Overall themes included: Parents who work in prevention felt that they were very informed about the issues of substance use, abuse and prevention where they worked. But when asked about the towns they lived in (which were often different) they felt less informed about what was going on in their own community. While they could answer all of the questions for the town they work in, when they thought about their residential town they freely admitted that they didn't necessarily know. They talked about the frustration of only being able to reach parents who are the "choir". They also mentioned how services were so different from town to town from what is offered through the school curriculum, to parent workshops, to positive youth development programming. The lack of consistency in individual school system curriculum was discussed at length. In terms of their having a voice in their residential communities regarding substance abuse and prevention, many felt that officials and personnel did not respond to them until they mentioned they worked in prevention – then they would get some attention. They felt this was very unfortunate as their concerns should be attended to because they are parents – not prevention specialists.

### **Region 2 Parent Focus Group – Manchester #2**

**Summary:** Due to some of the responses of the first group facilitated in Manchester, it was decided to hold another session with a brand new group of parents to see if their responses matched or deviated from that of the first group in November. This group was held on June 17, 2013 with 20 participants that were not part of the first group.

Overall themes were very much the same. Most parents talked about the easy availability of substances, especially Synthetic Marijuana and alcohol. Some parents felt that their kids didn't know about substances like inhalants. They mirrored the first group in stating that prevention activities were not available to their children or for themselves. DARE has been discontinued, there is a program called "Play By the Rules" but there is a select group of students that are allowed to participate. The school curriculum doesn't have much in it and it is the same basic information repeated at different grade levels. The information doesn't "build up on itself".

#### **Area of Concern 1: What is the nature, severity and impact of ATOD use and abuse in your community?**

Parents reported that substances that are used the most are Marijuana (including synthetic), prescription drugs, "Molly" and alcohol. Energy drinks were mentioned in two of the groups – parents felt like it was an up and coming issue. Some parents mentioned that they have heard of K3 or synthetic marijuana incidents involving youth and again, youth think it is safer because it isn't the real thing. Parents felt that youth begin their experimenting with alcohol but that Black and Hispanic youth specifically begin with marijuana more so than cigarettes or alcohol. A new drug that is gaining

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popularity -

“Molly” -

the powder or crystal form of MDMA – was mentioned in 4 of the groups. These new drugs concerned this parent in particular because other drugs are known about but parents have to work to keep up with the newest trends. Parents in the group felt that most substances are easy to get in their neighborhood and youth have multiple supply opportunities: buying them from other adults including older siblings, cousins, friends, etc.

How are youth accessing substances? Very easily: friends, family, schools, the neighborhood Bodegas – it is everywhere. Some parents stated that they know that other parents are giving their children access – especially to alcohol. All parents felt that substance abuse is a family problem and a community problem. All parents want to keep their children healthy and substance free but many acknowledged that there needs to be more education and they are too busy and stressed to seek it out unless there is a real problem.

**Area of Concern 2: What kinds of prevention resources/support networks are available and accessed now within the community?**

There was awareness in some communities about programming and yet in others there seemed to be a real lack of knowledge. Manchester and Waterbury parents really felt like there were not any prevention services or programming available for youth or adults. **ALL** parents mentioned that they are concerned about their children using substances and try to educate their children themselves. Most felt that it was up to them – and they weren’t always sure how to go about that. Many parents cited the lack of consistency on how the school curriculum handled educating youth around prevention techniques. Many of the Spanish speaking participants in the various groups mentioned that parent workshops offered only in English creates a barrier to their receiving timely, accurate information. Attending workshops or reading literature may be impossible unless someone can translate for them.

They all said that they get their information from friends, family and in some cases, their children themselves regarding substance use and abuse. Some who have time, use the internet to research. Their children are often founts of information until they themselves start experimenting, then they stop communicating. It is then parents said they know to be more mindful of what is going on with their children. Sometimes their child mentions something and they don’t know how to respond, nor do they even understand what they are talking about. In these instances, they look to their support systems to help them out with an answer.

**Area of Concern 3: What is your opinion of the plan’s approach?**

Parents felt that there needed to be more emphasis on high school level substance abuse prevention. As for a statewide plan, for Spanish speaking participants, the plan was talked about abstractly and without a document to show them, it proved difficult to garner responses or show any relevance to them. They saw their role in relationship to their child’s school and the group they regularly met with – not at a state or even city wide level. Interestingly enough, even the prevention specialists included in

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the region 3

focus

group did not have a lot to offer in responses. Again, there was a lack of relevance to both their work life and their home life. The strongest overall theme in regards to any plan was the need to enhance school curriculums and provide students with more sophisticated, consistent information across the school years.

**Area of Concern 4: How should we actively and effectively involve consumers in prevention program planning, implementation, and assessment?**

Parents had some great ideas when it comes to getting the substance abuse message out. They were very clear though, that fliers through the backpacks should not be the only way schools and social service agencies reach out to parents. Drawing attention to an issue should be done across many domains: one on one, social media, mail, text, phone tree, fliers, etc. Many cited that they are busy working one, two even three jobs and simply don't have time to search for information. Many mentioned that they often don't learn about services unless it is as a reactionary response – someone has identified that either they or their child would benefit. More programming and outreach needs to be in Spanish. Larger community events like 5ks, reaching out through adult leaders and coaches, and utilizing social media were all shared as ways to get information to a wider range of parents.

Many parents felt like local leaders are not concerned with parents' issues. Leaders play the bureaucratic/political game and those who could affect that game had their ear. In terms of school administration, it was a mixed bag. Some did not feel comfortable reaching out to administration for fear that their child would be retaliated against (and in some cases the parents were concerned about their own well-being too). Some felt that they could approach the school administration. Overall, most parents felt that if they did go to administration with a concern it wouldn't go far. There was definitely frustration around this issue across the board. When the discussion was directed at state level leaders, there was little experience with interacting with leaders at that level or there was the assumption that people in those roles were not interested in what parents as individuals have to say.

Overall, the parents were very eager to be heard and to share their opinions. They would like to do more of it but their schedule and lives do not allow them to seek out those opportunities. If organizations, policy makers, school personnel or statewide organizations want them to be a part of it, they need to come to the parents as was done with these focus groups.

Finally, every member of the focus groups were offered the opportunity to become part of the Parent Advisory Group – many thought it was an interesting idea and it was about time someone asked them for input. Without a clear outline of the time commitment though, participants were reluctant to give their names. Some offered to reconsider once the group had been formed or a clear schedule and structure was in place. Two wanted to become actively involved. The reporter feels confident that if re-approached, parents would be happy to join in on the conversation of the group. Before that can happen an outline of the group and the expectations would need to be created.

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