

# Prevention: Experts offer roadmap for what works, and what doesn't

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Lauri Turkovsky, senior prevention science coordinator at the Western Massachusetts Center for Healthy Communities, works with substance abuse prevention coalitions in Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire counties. One coalition she works with is the Strategic Planning Initiative For Families and Youth, known as SPIFFY, a Northampton-based coalition of health and human service providers, schools, businesses, government agencies and parents focused on youth substance abuse prevention in Hampshire County.

SPIFFY is a part of the Hampshire Educational Collaborative, a nonprofit, multiservice agency offering programs and services for vulnerable and at-risk youth. SPIFFY received a \$100,000 federal grant from the Department of Health and Human Services, which went into effect Monday, and will be spent throughout the next five years to prevent substance abuse in Easthampton, Northampton and Amherst. The following are Turkovsky's observations of what works - which will be taken into consideration when spending the grant money - and what doesn't work in terms of prevention of youth drug and alcohol use:

## What doesn't work

\* Scare tactics: "Includes mock car crashes, mock wakes and videos of drinking and driving accidents," Turkovsky said. "Sometimes someone from the emergency department at a local hospital comes in and talks about all the people that they've had to fix up or people who have died, all of those things are predominantly scare tactics. If you don't know much about the field they seem logically like what to do to prevent substance abuse. Most of the time those things are strategies that make us feel good but that are not actually very helpful."

\* Information dissemination: "This is predominantly what the Department of Education has their health frameworks based around, which is that you should know the effects of alcohol and drugs on your body," Turkovsky said. "This notion that what we need to do is give kids good information and let them make their own decisions is not appropriate. None of that works for prevention because people don't use because they think it's good for them, they use because of other kinds of pressures."

## What works

\* Shoulder tap survey: "This is when minors talk to adults in the parking lot of a package store and say something like 'I'm not old enough to buy alcohol and I'm wondering if I were to give you some money would you be able to go in and buy me a six pack,'" Turkovsky said. "Because it's hypothetical and they're not asking them to actually get it, there's no law being broken. The adults are given a card that either says, 'thank you for protecting our youth' if they say no or if they say yes they are given a card with the penalties involved."

\* Shoulder tap sting: A compliance check by either local police or the Alcohol Abuse Control Commission that monitors how area adults respond to minors seeking alcohol. If they agree and buy the alcohol, the adults are actually cited. "This is the same kind of deal as a shoulder tap survey except the law is broken," said Turkovsky. It is less commonly used than the shoulder tap survey, she noted, but is used in areas where there are problems with youth drinking and other efforts don't seem to work. "None of that is happening here at the moment, but it will be, as SPIFFY has their latest grant to do this," Turkovsky said.

\* Alcohol Purchase Survey: This is when a 21-year-old goes into a restaurant or bar to see if they get carded, which they should.

\* Server training: This is training anyone who sells liquor how to watch for underage drinking.

\* Local substance abuse prevention steering committees: "This is bringing stakeholders together to address the risk and protective factors around underage drinking and substance abuse," said Sue Cairn, project director of SPIFFY.

\* Addressing loitering issues: "In some communities kids may drink or smoke marijuana in parks and other public places," Cairn said. "Something as simple as keeping the lights on in these places could help."

\* Social norm campaign: "This is targeted at youth groups," Cairn said. "It explains to kids what their peers' perceptions toward underage drinking really are versus what they think they are."

\* Town forum: "This is gathering information from our report and addressing it to the community for discussion," Cairn said. "Community needs can be evaluated by stakeholders like businesses, community faith leaders, schools and parents."

\* All-Stars: "This is an evidence-based underage drinking and substance abuse prevention curriculum that is effective," Turkovsky said. The curriculum is delivered in 13 one-hour sessions that are developmentally appropriate and peer-directed. "It is an open conversation between kids - as opposed to a directed conversation from the teacher to kids - who talk about their perceptions of drug, alcohol, violence and early sexual involvement. It gets kids to think about what kind of future they want, and asks them to answer how drugs and alcohol can get them that future. It's the kids themselves that talk about their goals."

The curriculum also has a parent component in which parents are given their children's goals and offered a chance to provide feedback.