

AIDAC focuses on D&A abuse prevention and treatment

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CLARION NEWS Writer

Aug. 27 saw the first gathering of the newly forming Clarion Drug and Alcohol Coalition, with community leaders and staff from Armstrong-Indiana Drug and Alcohol Commission (AIDAC) meeting to discuss the region's substance abuse issues and begin to come up with proactive solutions to combat those problems.

The coalition has scheduled its second meeting for 11 a.m. Sept. 24 at the Bureau of Forestry building along Second Avenue in Clarion.

In the first part of this three part report, we looked at the area's drug

and alcohol problem from the point of view of Clarion County District Attorney Mark Aaron. In part two, we heard the story of Brandon Hilyer, a 21-year-old man who lost his life in a September 2008 drunk driving crash, as told by his father Vern Hilyer, a Clarion man who has made it his life's work to combat drunk driving and save young lives.

In this final installment, we turn our attention to some of the solutions offered by coalition members to these substance abuse problems.

Jimmy McGee, Clarion University's Coordinator of Health Promotions, had some good news for the group. According to 2005 and 2010 student surveys, alcohol use in the past 30

days is down by 35.5 percent from 2005 and binge drinking in the previous two weeks is down 55 percent among polled students. All 14 state universities are working with a \$500,000 grant to reduce high risk drinking by seven percent by September 2011, McGee said.

McGee said between 60 and 80 percent of his job is working with university students who violate the university's drug and alcohol policies both on and off campus and he has forged strong relationships with the county district attorney's office; state, borough, and campus police; as well as District Judge Duane Quinn.

"It's a seamless transition as far as the student
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getting in trouble off campus to coming right into our program to get the prevention/intervention help they need on campus," McGee said.

On the negative side, McGee said amphetamine use is up 69 percent and prescription drug usage is also up "considerably."

"Some of the students who need it sell it," McGee said referring to prescription drugs. "Some of the students who don't need it are taking it, primarily for studying purposes, cramming at the last minute and not understanding the effects of it."

McGee said the university is spearheading several programs and bringing speakers to educate the students of the dangers of prescription drug abuse.

Marijuana use was down 50.2 percent, McGee said, "which is nice; however, we have had an uptick in marijuana arrests this last year."

problems we have with licensees," Jones said. In Clarion County, Jones' office doesn't have a lot of problems with licensees, he said. No Clarion County bar is considered a "nuisance bar," he commented. "In seven years, we've never had to take nuisance action against any of our licensees."

"If we get 100 calls a week, 90 of them are questions from licensees on how to do things properly. Seven years ago if we got 100 calls a week, 80 of those were complaints."

Carrie Bence, AIDAC deputy director and former Indiana University of Pennsylvania police officer, went next and ran through some 2008-09 statistics from Clarion County Drug and Alcohol. According to the numbers, D&A did 26 student assistance program referrals, meeting with students who were referred for a drug or alcohol problem.

meanor criminal offense that carries large fines and possible civil action, Bence commented.

"Picture your community drug free" is the theme of the commission's work and hopefully the new coalition can help Clarion County residents to picture their communities without the dangers of drugs, she said.

AIDAC Clarion County Prevention Specialist Rita Woodard went next telling the group the last few months have been "a whirlwind of events," as AIDAC has begun to establish a presence in Clarion County.

The prevention department is heavily focused on getting its "Too good for drugs" curriculum into all Clarion County schools. The program is a ten session, evidence-based anti-drug curriculum with an incredible success rate, Woodard said.

Woodard said the

McGee and others from the university have been working the college's "Good Neighbor" program and have spoken with most of the off campus student residents, especially along South Fifth Avenue, where police and community members have experienced problems with students.

State Police Bureau of Liquor Control Enforcement Sgt. Jamie Jones, who told the group his primary concern is alcohol and he and his staff are responsible for enforcing all the PLCB-licensed retail alcohol distributors.

"We look at stopping alcohol problems at their starting point, where people are consuming alcohol," Jones said. "The general population doesn't sit at home and get themselves to a really high BAC (blood alcohol content) and then go out and cause trouble. The majority of people are in the bars; are over served. That's really where we want to hit it."

Jones said the work of similar coalitions has helped his staff experience a 40 percent decrease in liquor citations in Indiana County.

Forty-nine percent of the clients were from the criminal justice population and 63 percent of those clients received outpatient treatment. Clarion County D&A did 435 assessments, Bence said.

Alcohol, heroin, and marijuana, in that order, were the primary substances dealt with for adult admissions, she said, and for those under the age of 18, alcohol is the major problem, followed by marijuana.

Bence said as Clarion County Drug and Alcohol Services grows, they would like to write for a \$125,000 per year, five-year drug free communities grant to establish coalitions within the community to work on reducing substance abuse among youth and adults.

Grant or none, the commission will focus on environmental prevention strategies to reduce abuse risks and enhance law enforcement and educational programs and reducing barriers that keep people with substance abuse problems from seeking and finding help.

In Armstrong and Indiana counties, Bence said

department has been working very hard and will try to have a greater presence at this year's Autumn Leaf Festival in Clarion, and will also be active at New Bethlehem's Peanut Butter Festival.

The department is also working on a couple of initiatives in conjunction with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Month and Recovery Month, Woodard told the coalition.

"Hopefully we get knee deep into a whole lot more throughout the year," she commented. "We have a lot of hopes and dreams; so, hopefully, we can make those dreams come true."

Prevention specialist Joel Alex closed the meeting by asking members to begin thinking of possible mission and vision statements for the new coalition.

Alex said the coalition should also think about forming committees that can utilize each member's different skill sets to fight drug and alcohol abuse. Ideally, the coalition will be "ever-growing," he said, and constantly recruiting new members, especially youth members who can "be the wheels for (the

A lot of work is educational, Jones said, as about 90 percent of businesses operate within the liquor laws.

"The vast majority, 90 percent-plus of the licensees, want as much to operate within the law and regulations as we want them to, but sometimes they're not aware," Jones commented. "We try to educate the licensees as best we can."

In the past, licensees learned little by little by being cited, which is "no way to learn how to operate responsibly," the sergeant said.

Jones and his staff are experiencing tight times, with a reduction of almost 50 percent in manpower, Jones said, but believe the coalitions make a dramatic impact and pledged his office's limited resources to help the new coalition as best he can.

"I would guess our complaints are down at least 40 percent as far as the

the commission puts on a lot of community programs, including an underage drinking task force and town hall meetings, where youths are encouraged to tell the community the issues they face in their young lives.

The commission also makes radio ads, and Bence played a recent spot with Sgt. Jones telling listeners of the dangers of underage drinking and providing alcohol to minors.

Re-educating law enforcement personnel to issue citations to underage drinkers and not simply pour out seized alcohol and send the offending minors on their way is another way the commission has changed the fight, Bence said.

The "Parents who host lose the most" campaign has also helped to educate parents of the dangers of holding underage drinking parties at their houses, a third-degree misde-

coalition's car.

"We want to keep our coalition active in the community doing different kinds of prevention and treatment," Alex commented, and asked members to think of activities to help carry the coalition's message.

The coalition will also eventually need a chair and vice-chair, he said, before turning the floor over for suggestions from members.

Clarion County District Attorney Mark Aaron told Alex the coalition should invite Clarion County Detective William Peck IV to the next meeting. Peck is the county's only drug agent, Aaron said, and Alex said he would add Peck to the list of invitees for the Sept. 24 session.

The coalition is open to any community member who wants to make a difference in Clarion County's battle against drug and alcohol abuse, Alex concluded. ■