

MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

Bridging the Gap – Moving Toward Evidence-Based Practice

ADDICTIONS

Recommended Pilot Program

The Addictions Learning Community recommends a **High School Alcohol Diversion Program**, based on a Campus Drug Court model, as a pilot project. This program would offer students with alcohol violations an alternative to being removed from their home schools and placed at alternative schools. The program would provide campus-based screening, assessment, intervention, and – if necessary – a referral to residential treatment.

Executive Summary

The Addictions Learning Community spent six months evaluating the research on addictions in children and adolescents. Addictions are defined by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) as “a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences. It is considered a brain disease because drugs change the brain's structure and the way it works. These brain changes can be long lasting, and can lead to the harmful behaviors seen in people who abuse drugs.”

After a careful review of the literature, current policies, and programs that impact underage drinking, the Addictions Learning Community strongly felt that there was an obvious gap in services for youth involved in underage drinking. Another gap occurs because there is a community “norm” that minimizes the seriousness of alcohol use among adolescents. Underage drinking, according to the articles reviewed, carries significant consequences. Below are just a few of the emerging concerns:

- The average age Tarrant County youth begin drinking is 11.6.
- Alcohol accounts for 30-40% of hospital admissions each year.
- Drinking teens have a 10% smaller hippocampus and perform 10% poorer on memory, geometry and IQ tests.
- In a 2006 survey, approximately 37% of Tarrant County youth reported they had used alcohol in the month prior to the survey.
- Youth who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcoholics.
- 7,800 youth try alcohol for the first time every day.
- Female teens who drink are 63% likelier to become teen mothers.
- Alcohol is the leading contributor to death from injuries among those under 21.
- Alcohol leads to an alteration of brain structure and functioning of the developing brain, leading to consequences beyond adolescence.
- Alcohol is associated with academic failures, illicit drug use, tobacco use and medical problems.

- Alcohol increases the risk of committing or being a victim of a physical or sexual assault.
- Alcohol affects how well a young person judges risk and makes sound decisions.
- Alcohol plays a significant role in risky sexual activity.
- Texas leads the country in the number of drunken-driving fatalities, with 1,354 deaths in 2006 due to drunken driving as of July 2007. (Department of Transportation, 2007)

Learning Community Members:

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Summary of Research on Addictions

Preface to the Jar Special Issue: The Drug Abuse Treatment Outcome Studies for Adolescents

The adolescent component in Drug Abuse Treatment Outcome Studies (DATOS) was the first designed specifically to conduct an in-depth, systematic investigation of the outcomes and effectiveness of drug treatment programs for adolescents.

The effects of Drug treatment on Criminal Behavior among Adolescents in DATOS

The primary goals of this study were to assess the effect of substance abuse treatment on adolescent crime and to identify the patient characteristics that were most closely associated with reductions in crime during the post treatment period. Results confirmed that among adolescents who had engaged in criminal activity during the 12 months prior to entering DATOS-A treatment, reductions in alcohol or marijuana use were independently associated with significant reductions in the likelihood of committing crimes during the 12-month follow-up period.

Adolescent Substance Abuse: A Public Health Priority, Position Paper of the Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy (2002)

This report is structured as a public health strategy planning report and is organized into initiatives within which the Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy (PLNDP) has identified policy recommendations and priorities for further research. This report introduces the statistics around adolescent substance abuse and looks at key elements such as prevention, screening, assessment, treatment and recommendations for policy.

Substance Abuse and the Adolescent Brain: An Overview with a Focus on Alcohol, Aaron M. White, Ph.D. (2004)

The purpose of this summary is to briefly discuss recent findings regarding adolescent substance use, adolescent brain development and the impact of alcohol on adolescent behavior and brain function.

Drugs, Brains and Behavior: The Science of Addiction by National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health (April 2007)

This article aims to fill the knowledge gap by providing scientific information about the disease of drug addiction, including the many harmful consequences of drug abuse and the basic approaches that have been developed to prevent and treat the disease. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) believes that increased understanding of the basics of addiction will empower people to make informed choices in their own lives, adopt science-based policies and programs that reduce drug abuse and addiction in their communities, and support scientific research that improves the nation's well-being.

Specificity of social anxiety disorder as a risk factor for alcohol and cannabis dependence, J.D. Buckner et al, Journal of Psychiatric Research (2007)

Social anxiety in youth, but not other anxiety or mood disorders, seems to set the stage for marijuana or alcohol dependence. So treating adolescents with social anxiety might reduce such dependence. Individuals who are socially anxious often use alcohol or marijuana to calm their nerves. But can social anxiety actually

predispose people to marijuana or alcohol dependence? The answer seems to be yes, based on a large prospective study by N.B. Schmidt, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Florida State University, and colleagues.

Evidence-Based Programs Identified

- Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral, and Treatment model (SBIRT)
- CRAFFT screening tool
- Communities that Care
- Cannabis Youth Treatment
- Community Anchors (St Louis)
- Drug Court Model
- Strategic Prevention Framework
- Trauma Informed Services
- 3 in 1 Framework (alcohol)
- Motivational Interviewing
- Motivation Enhancement Therapy (MET)
- Trauma Adolescent Tool kit
- Seeking Safety
- Adolescent Transitions Program,
- Cognitive Based Therapy
- Pharmacotherapy
- Campus Drug Court

Specific Areas of Need in Tarrant County Related to Addictions

After a careful review of the literature, and current policies and programs that impact underage drinking, the Learning Community strongly felt that there was an obvious gap in services for youth involved in underage drinking as well. This is also a community “norm” that minimizes the seriousness of alcohol use among adolescents. Underage drinking creates significant needs in our community. The needs the learning community identified are:

- Early onset of drinking behaviors among youth (Tarrant County: 11 years 6 months).
- Earlier identification/ screening of alcohol issues are needed. Often times, the youth has to enter the juvenile justice system before an assessment is completed.
- An early intervention strategy is needed to prevent youth from further incursion into alcohol addiction. Currently, these youth are given a citation and possible expelled from school, but intervention or treatment is often not offered.
- Access to treatment/intervention services, compliance in attending programs and transportation to physically get to a program are significant obstacles/needs of adolescents with alcohol issues.
- There is still a significant “stigma” issue about attending treatment/intervention for addiction issues.
- Currently, a student with an alcohol violation (if occurring on school property or at a school function) is third-partied to an alternative school for a period of time. We need a response to alcohol violations that address the problem but don’t interrupt a student’s education.

- Need to influence the drinking culture that minimizes the seriousness of alcohol and adolescents (the “it’s just alcohol, not drugs” message/ culture).
- Need for information/education about the medical dangers of alcohol (effect on brain development) and the problems associated with alcohol (sexual activity, trouble with the law, accidents, etc.).

Tarrant County, like many other communities, must initiate a change in the social environment to address the issue of high-risk drinking. Currently, the general public and under-age drinking youth view high-risk binge drinking as a problem with few repercussions more serious than a hangover. Changing the perception of high-risk drinking from a rite of passage to a public health issue fraught with immediate, long-term, negative ramifications is critical to the successful implementation of any prevention, intervention or treatment among our youth. It is our hope that the High School **Alcohol Diversion Program** will assist our community in changing this “norm” and providing much needed prevention, intervention and treatment with our youth.

Recommended Evidence-Based Practice or Program for Addictions

The Addictions Learning Community recommends an **Alcohol Diversion Program**, based on a Campus Drug Court model, as a pilot project in Tarrant County. This program would offer students with alcohol violations an alternative to being removed from their home school and placed at alternative schools. The program would provide campus-based screening, assessment and intervention, as well as a referral to residential treatment if necessary. The incentive of maintaining their academic progress and social support at their home school would serve as the initial motivation for being in the program. The program would include:

- Education on the dangers of underage drinking
- Development of pro-social activities
- Improvement in communication and problem-solving skills
- Identification of needs that might be having an impact on the youth (such as mental health issues, parental engagement issues, and unresolved trauma)

An Alcohol Diversion Program would address the following:

- The community is not currently addressing underage drinking thoroughly, leaving an obvious gap in which hundred of children are lost each year.
- There are drastic consequences associated with underage drinking, as well as a significant cost to the community.
- The program addresses the problem in a non-punitive way that seeks to provide much-needed intervention and treatment services.
- The campus-based program is easily accessed, alleviating the need for transportation and reducing the stigma associated with formalized treatment centers.
- The program incorporates motivational strategies to increase an adolescent’s readiness to change and a series of incentives and sanctions to insure continued compliance.

- The program involves parents by offering them education and skill development on such issues as anger management, communication skills and alcohol education.
- The program works with one family at a time on changing the social norms regarding alcohol and adolescent development.
- The program would impact the social norms regarding alcohol use within the student body.
- The program would prevent disruption in academic performance as youth would not have to be expelled to alternative school settings, many of which do not offer the same courses the student is currently enrolled.
- The program has the potential to reduce or eliminate fees parents typically have to pay associated with alcohol citations.
- The program works to develop peer advocate systems that would increase positive support systems for youth.

The weaknesses identified by the Addictions Learning Community include:

- Referral to the program is still dependent on youth being identified through an alcohol violation, thus not addressing youth who are using alcohol but who have not been caught at school or at a school function. Creating a self-referral process to the program may mitigate this weakness.
- Although the Drug Court Model has proven to be very effective for juveniles with addiction issues, this program has typically centered on judicial systems rather than municipal or school systems. It is anticipated that motivational enhancement and significant incentives will support positive outcomes.
- The program requires parental involvement, which can be difficult to obtain but is necessary. The Learning Community hopes the motivational enhancement component of the program will engage parents in participating. Once involved, the development of various skills in managing adolescents and the knowledge of how detrimental alcohol use is for adolescents will keep parents engaged.

Clearly, there is a benefit to our community in addressing the number one health problem for adolescents in a way that increases knowledge, develops functional coping mechanisms, improves parent-child relations and addresses the harmful norm that underage drinking has few consequences. This program has the additional benefit of impacting underage drinking directly, which reduces the negative impact on adolescent brain development and maximizes a youth's opportunities for the future.

Barriers to Effective Implementation

The anticipated barriers to the pilot project include the following:

- Schools may be resistant to the program as many school districts are hesitant to admit that their students may have issues with substance abuse.
- There must be an investment among school districts, school resources officers, community prevention and intervention agencies of money, time and staffing.
- There is a "community norm" regarding alcohol, which diminishes the risks the community associates with underage drinking ("just a few beers" mentality, alcohol as a rite of passage, not perceived as serious a problem as "drugs").

- There exists a “zero tolerance” viewpoint among some agencies and school districts that has dictated policy regarding alcohol violations. Work needs to be done to help the community see that prevention and treatment are better options than just enforcement.
- Existing policy requires mandatory alternative school expulsion for alcohol violations.
- Loss of revenue from citations.

The solutions for these barriers could be achieved through the following:

- Educate school districts, law enforcement and the community on the impact of alcohol on adolescents and on the effectiveness of prevention, intervention and treatment.
- Emphasize to school districts and the community that the educational progress of students suffers with removal to alternative schools and that it is possible to develop and implement on-campus programs that are highly effective in changing problematic behaviors.
- Provide funds and services to the high school for addressing alcohol problems.
- Work with school districts on minimizing the time frame for mandatory expulsion to an alternative school.

Needed Policies to Support this Recommendation

The Texas Education Agency has a mandatory expulsion policy for drug/alcohol issues. It is suggested that a waiver or variance be requested for the campus willing to pilot this program. If that is not a possibility, there are some ways in which the policy can be “worked around,” including:

- Citation not completed pending acceptance into the Diversion program. If student refuses to attend, then the citation can be processed.
- Address the school districts’ time frames for alternative school expulsion. For example, shorten the mandatory time in alternative school to one day and then the student could return to the regular classroom and begin the Diversion Program.

Community-wide Implementation and Action Plan

The Addictions Learning Community recommends the following action plan for implementation of this pilot project:

- Addictions Learning Community volunteers will present the pilot program idea to targeted groups: Mental Health Connection on December 10th, MADD, Under-age drinking coalitions, ISD drug/alcohol counselors.
- Create a stakeholder group to take primary ownership of the project (interested schools, treatment and prevention providers and community volunteers).
- Identify school districts that are proactive in addressing addiction issues and have a history of working in collaboration with providers.

- Present to municipal judges to find a municipality that would be willing to participate in the program.
- Develop PowerPoint for all Learning Community volunteers to use in presenting to various community groups.

Strategies for Keeping the Knowledge Current and Widely Shared

The Addictions Learning Community has two recommendations to keep knowledge about addiction issues current and shared.

1. Fully utilize the newly developed blog on Mental Health Connection's website. By accessing this blog, professionals and other interested parties from our community and from across the globe will have access to up-to-date information, emerging trends and statistical data that will positively impact how addiction issues are addressed. Members of the Addictions Learning Community will post new research, new evidence-based treatment programs and evaluation results from the addictions field. On-going dialogue will keep the Learning Community connected and informed, thus resulting in a higher standard of professionalism.
2. Maintain an ongoing Addictions Learning Community, with each interested agency taking responsibility for facilitating a meeting, researching new articles and presenting new evidence-based programs. Policy issues will be addressed, materials reviewed and strategies for change developed. The Learning Community hopes to continue meeting quarterly.