

New coalition prepares to battle substance abuse in the Tri-Towns

Masco students in grades 7-12 will fill out a Youth Behavior Survey this month to help the new Tri-Town Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition determine the needs of the community



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Topsfield Boxford Middleton —

Is there an increasing amount of drug/alcohol abuse among youngsters in the Tri-Towns? How can the Tri-Town communities work to reduce at-risk behaviors and substance abuse among youngsters in the towns of Boxford, Middleton and Topsfield?

A new coalition — made up of Tri-Town people from many segments of the community— was recently established under the umbrella of the Tri-Town Council, a non-profit group that services the three towns.

Last spring residents from all corners of the Tri-Town community — police enforcement, churches, schools, parents, businesses, health officials and civic groups — were invited by Tri-Town Council's Lisa Teichner, programs and operations director, to join the new coalition, which has been named the Tri-Town Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition.

Patterned after similar coalitions that exist in Danvers, Newburyport and Lynnfield, the Coalition will eventually apply for grant funding by March of 2012 and hopes to receive as much as \$125,000. This money would be used to fuel local projects and people to staff them including a coalition coordinator, youth coordinator, health education programs, parent programs and community events. The Tri-Town Coalition will also apply for a mentor grant that would bring monetary resources to help the part-time Tri-Town Council staff work with the Danvers Cares staffers to move forward with the process of applying for the larger grant, said Teichner.

Speaking last month to a large group of school officials including the three elementary school committees and the Masco School Committee, Teichner, reported that she was “welcomed with open arms” and is now moving forward to gather up the resources of the community.

“We’ve spent the last several months investigating what other communities do,” said Teichner who mentioned that one of the chief goals is to “reduce access to alcohol and other drugs. We don’t want to see parents or older siblings providing alcohol to youth. And adults should be locking up prescription drugs too,” she added.

“We also want to change student perception about what drug and alcohol use is” and Teichner noted that another future goal would also be to make parents aware about drug and alcohol perceptions.

Some strategies, suggested Teichner, would be “to look toward the community to make alcohol less of a priority at social events” and to work with police departments on compliance checks and party patrols.

Data collection is under way

Noting that the coalition is in its infancy, Teichner admitted that they don't yet have a lot of Tri-Town youth data.

In 2009 a Youth Behavior Survey was done at Masco, but consent was needed from parents and guardians in order to have the youngsters participate, explained Teichner who said that only about 50 percent of the middle schoolers and 40 percent at the high school answered surveys in 2009.

This month the coalition will again administer a survey at Masco to begin the collection of data about Tri-Town youth behaviors and possible abuses. But this time a passive consent form was sent home in August to parents who had the option to send back a form, opting out of the survey if they wish. "Less than five percent have chosen not to participate this time," said Teichner. "The data will be far more relevant and reflect what's going on in the middle school and high school," said the program director.

The youth surveys will be conducted in the Middle School on Nov. 15 and at the high school on Nov. 22.

The results will be processed by an outside group, the Northeast Center for Healthy Communities, with results coming back to the Tri-Town Council by March. The study will be repeated in two years to reassess if the coalition's work is being effective, Teichner said.

Eventually, a community questionnaire on alcohol use will also be widely distributed, said Teichner.

Planning stages

Recently, the coalition met to conduct a strategic planning session to plan for the future including the development of a mission statement as well as short-term achievable goals such as a parent survey and social host responsibility.

"Substance abuse does exist, it is real and harmful and can be prevented," said Teichner who pointed out that nationwide in 2008 and 2009 there was actually an up tick in substance abuse among children reported.

The Tri-Towns are not immune to substance and drug abuse problems, stressed Teichner, who concluded that research has indicated a correlation between students who are under great stress to achieve and problems with substance abuse.

"Hopefully, we will see positive outcomes over the next few years," she said.