



Published November 1st, 2017

Forum focuses on combating high prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse in teens

By Sora O'Doherty

According to the California Healthy Kids Survey, which is administered every two years at every school in the state of seventh, ninth and 11th grade students, Lamorinda outpaced the rest of the county and even the state on substance use prevalence, with over 40 percent of Lamorinda 11th graders reporting use of alcohol or drugs within the past 30 days, and 20 percent reporting episodes of binge drinking within the past 30 days. In addition, over 20 percent of 11th graders reported that they had been "very drunk" seven or more times in their lives.

The Lamorinda Regional Community Forum on Alcohol and Other Drug Services met Oct. 19 in the Lafayette Library for the purpose of garnering community feedback on updating the five-year Strategic Plan for Contra Costa County Alcohol and Other Drugs Prevention. The current plan was adopted to cover the period 2013 through 2018 and identified three major goals: to reduce underage drinking, to reduce marijuana use, and to maintain the capacity of sustainability of the AOD prevention system.

The presenters included Jaime Rich, director of ADAPT, and, from the Contra Costa County Behavioral Health Department Fatima Matal Sol, AODS program chief, and Isabelle Kirske, prevention coordinator. Others in attendance included a variety of professionals in the field, members of the Orinda Teen Advisory Council, and interested members of the public.

The group viewed a PowerPoint presentation that included statistics of Lamorinda substance use, prevalence, and access and availability of marijuana and alcohol. Three breakout groups at the forum discussed goals, the main trends, issues or problems that deserve focus; recommended prevention programs or strategies.

One reported trend was that parents are sometimes asking schools for the return of drugs and alcohol confiscated from their children. While parent education and teaching parents what to look for is the key, it was said, it can be difficult to get parents to attend educational events. To engage parents, it was suggested that presentations should be like TED talks: succinct and mildly entertaining. It is also important to keep on top of emerging issues, such as prescription drug use. One breakout group noted that some parents think that marijuana is less damaging than alcohol, but that they may be unaware of the changes to modern marijuana, which is more potent and dangerous than it was decades ago. The focus should be on the degree of harm, as opposed to abstinence, and peer-to-peer counseling was considered ideal, but difficult to achieve.

In regard to drug use on high school campus, the sense of the group seemed to be that there should be consistently applied consequences, although it was also noted that kids are not afraid of consequences. Diversion programs and counseling were favored, with an emphasis on how to make diversion useful instead of punitive.

The problems include the easy availability of marijuana, which is also very easy to conceal (See related story on page A6). The availability of edible marijuana was also discussed. Parents, it was felt, are very unaware of the problems. A major goal should be to continue to raise awareness, especially among parents.

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