

Youth Programs Key to Drug Use Prevention

VILLAS- Nationally and locally heroin use has doubled. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency is terming heroin use at epidemic proportions.

Lower Township Mayor Michael Beck said the level of drug abuse has doubled from three years ago.

“The amount of arrests we’ve had and the amount of people that have requested rehabilitation, they mimic each other and they are both at a certain level,” he said. “We’ve stabilized at a rate that is becoming the new normal and it can’t stay that way, it’s unacceptable.”

“If we have one student in our school who is involved with substance abuse in any way, shape or form, it’s one too many,” he continued.

Beck said he needed the police to deal with current users and dealers but needed the schools and the Lower Township Recreation Department to deal with the next generation. He praised the recreation department for going beyond traditional athletic programs and helping kids develop a sense of pride.

“It’s the sense of pride that ultimately is the armor that protects them in the daily fight against these temptations,” said Beck.

He noted teens needed to be able to refuse drugs from a friend. Teachers must now act as part time social workers while the recreation staff has also become part time police, part time social workers and counselors, said Beck

Preventing drug abuse in children is a primary role of parents, said the mayor.

“Parents have got to step up,” said Beck. “Parents have got to protect their kids.”

He expressed concerns that a senator from North Jersey wants to legalize marijuana.

“For the kids in school that sends a mixed message,” said Beck.

Lower Cape May Regional High School started a campaign called Stand UPP (Uniting Parents for Protection). Superintendent Christopher Kobik said the program asks parents to sign a pledge to certify that they are providing a drug and alcohol free environment for youth to socialize. The school will publish the list.

Substance abuse prevention is built into the seventh through 12th grade health curriculum and is also addressed at the elementary school level, said Kobik. At the high school level, drug education is part of peer leadership initiatives, mentoring programs, guidance counseling services and through an agreement with school-based Youth Services, he said.

Kobik said peer pressure to use drugs may have lessened.

“The culture has changed among our youth, generally speaking I think students today are living cleaner than in the past,” he said.

Kobik said once students leave the school and become independent adults, as evidenced by the tragedies surrounding heroin use in the area, some are making bad choices. He said those using drugs may range from their mid-to-late 20s to 50s.

Kobik said he agrees self esteem and positive activities are a powerful preventative to substance abuse.

“If kids are involved in sports, involved in activities, if students are busy doing positive things they don’t have a whole lot of time to get themselves in trouble,” he said. “That’s why we continue to cast that wide net and provide all those things.”

