

October, 2009

## Communities Join NOPE For Fresh Approach to Fighting Drug Abuse

**Seminole County, Fla. is the newest NOPE chapter. Community leaders there decided they needed the group's blunt school presentations after many teenagers revealed fears about the spread of illegal and prescription drugs.**

By Leon Fooksman



When drug abuse became a major concern for youths in a central Florida community last year, a police chief called NOPE Task Force.

Chief Robert Merchant and other leaders in Seminole County wanted a new school program that could speak to students about the deadly consequences of drugs. They also wanted parents to recognize the signs of drug dependence and realize their children are confronted by drugs all the time.

NOPE's anti-drug presentations to more than 150,000 students, parents and community leaders in recent years made it a natural choice to take the county's fight against drugs deeper into the community, Merchant said.

"This evolved from the students. They wanted this," Merchant said, who heads the Altamonte Springs Police Department and learned about NOPE at a police chiefs association meeting in 2007.

And so, NOPE's sixth and newest chapter was started this fall at a time when drug overdoses are increasing across the nation and many communities are scrambling to address the problem.

The task force is expanding into areas needing a fresh approach to steering youths away from drugs at a relatively low cost, said Jeff Lindskoog, a NOPE board member and captain in the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office in Florida.

Close to a dozen other communities in Florida, Louisiana and other states are considering starting NOPE chapters.

The grassroots group's network of community leaders delivers personal and blunt presentations, during which police officers show body bags and explain the painful task of making death notifications to distraught families, and parents who lost children to drugs share their suffering.

"We've come a long way," NOPE's Executive Director Karen Perry said. "I'm thrilled with the direction we're headed in."

The seeds for NOPE started in 2002, when the Florida Office of Drug Control noticed an alarming number of drug-related deaths among youths in Palm Beach County and requested the community to take action. Leaders from governments, businesses and schools joined families to form a task force aimed at reaching youths in schools through dramatic presentations.

NOPE became a nonprofit in 2004 and expanded its mission to include drug treatment support and assessments as well as work with legislators to curb drug abuse.

Since then, the group has added on other initiatives, most notably the creation of the NOPE National Candle Light Vigil which draws thousands in more than 25 cities to bring attention to the destructive forces of abusing drugs. In another sign of the group's growing influence, researchers at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla. have started analyzing hundreds of student letters send to NOPE following presentations in search of common attitudes toward drugs.

"We have the premier anti-drug message," Lindskoog said.

Merchant, the police chief, made the call for that reason.

In Seminole County, teenage drug overdoses rate isn't as high as in other parts of the country, Merchant said. But the youths there revealed in high school surveys and a youth summit that they feared the nationwide spread of illicit drugs and prescription painkillers abuse was heading toward their towns.



After training from NOPE organizers, community leaders did their first high school presentation in October.

His community is planning presentations at five of the county's nine high schools this school year, and hoping to expand into other schools the following year.

"Once the word gets out, this will evolve and get much bigger," he said.

*Leon Fooksman is a journalist who writes for NOPE Task Force. He can be reached at [leon@astorytellingcompany.com](mailto:leon@astorytellingcompany.com).*

*To learn more about becoming a NOPE chapter, contact NOPE's Executive Director Karen Perry at 561-478-1055.*