

Delco experts, families talk about heroin horrors

By Rose Quinn, Delaware County Daily Times

Saturday, February 8, 2014



Maybe it was the body bag, or blown-up photographs of smiling faces of deceased young people staring down at the students who filled the Sun Valley High School auditorium recently.

Bottom line: Heroin kills.

Prescription drug and heroin abuse was the topic at separate forums recently at Sun Valley and Ridley high schools, where audiences of either students, parents, educators or coaches gathered to learn about — and discuss — the often silent problem with no single or simple solution.

It's a conversation that program coordinators all agree must continue in order to save lives.

"The more children know, the less their curiosity will lead them down a path to a possible overdose," Deputy District Attorney Sharon McKenna said during the Feb. 5 presentation by the Delaware County Heroin Task Force at Ridley High School. "Common misconceptions about the safety of prescription drugs need to be combatted."

In 2013, there were 63 heroin-related deaths in Delaware County.

Studies are finding that most heroin addicts started with other "gateway" drugs; 80 percent of heroin addicts began with an addiction to prescription opioids such as Vicodin, OxyContin or Percocet, according to Drug Free Pennsylvania, a non-profit education organization.

In response to the death of celebrity Philip Seymour Hoffman in New York last weekend, Drug Free Pennsylvania stated, "Read a story about him anywhere on the Internet, a story identifying his brilliance as an actor and the sadness of his passing. Even sadder, most people don't understand the gravity of the heroin epidemic in our country ... As a parent, coach, teacher or other child role model, it's important to understand the dangers of heroin and other Opioids and have a serious conversation with the children with whom you interact."

Delco welcomes NOPE

More than 200 parents and students attended a presentation of the newest chapter of the Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education (NOPE) Task Force on Jan. 30 at Sun Valley High School in Aston. The evening program came on the heels of a Jan. 29 training session, which was followed by morning assemblies Jan. 30 for the Sun Valley High School student body.

Aston resident Tricia Stouch, whose 19-year-old daughter Pamela died in 2010, was instrumental in bringing NOPE to Delaware County.

"It's too late for my daughter," said Stouch, who is also a member of the Delaware County Heroin Task Force. "But I might be able to help somebody else's child."

NOPE was formed in Palm Beach, Fla., in 2004 to combat the illegal use of prescription drugs and narcotics, as well as other abused substances. NOPE Task Force, Inc. training manager Laura Guelzow was on-hand to oversee the training and introduce the new Delaware County chapter.

With about 20 large head shots of young people who died of prescription drug or heroin overdose looming in the background, Guelzow told those in attendance at the evening session that prescription drug and heroin abuse is plaguing every community in the United States.

She told the heartbreaking stories of the young people in the pictures; The youngest being 13 years old. Among the photographs on prominent display were those of a tuxedoed 18-year-old high school graduate and underneath lying dead in a casket, as well as photographs of two brothers who died of a drug overdose within three weeks of each other. The siblings were found in their home by their father.

"All of the kids pictured here could have been saved," Guelzow said. "Others knew they were doing drugs and were afraid to tell."

Guelzow said NOPE wants to empower students to "become heroes" to their friends and family members.

"We need the students to realize it's not telling or snitching and that these are life and death situations. Every story behind me had missed opportunities," she said.

Guelzow said at the Sun Valley student session held earlier in the day, the pupils entered the auditorium cheerful, laughing and chatting, but after a short video was shown, there was complete silence in the room.

"And they stayed silent throughout the entire presentation," Guelzow said.

"You could hear a pin drop," said Delaware County District Attorney Jack Whelan, who addressed students at what he described as "a very powerful" morning session.

During the morning presentation, the students were asked to stand. Then, two questions were posed.

"We asked those students who knew someone that was using drugs or alcohol to be seated," Guelzow said. "About three-fourths of the students sat down."

Guelzow said students were then asked how many told someone about their friend's drug or alcohol use.

Less than 20 students rose from their seats.

Guelzow told the students to be empowered because the earlier the intervention, the better.

"Don't be afraid you will get into trouble," she said. "Call 911 and please put life first. Be a hero and tell someone."

During the student presentation, a body bag was on display.

At the parent session that evening, Sun Valley graduate Mitch Vidovich, legislative aide to U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., said the issue of prescription drug and heroin abuse came to the forefront last summer when the Senator met with Whelan and members of the Delaware County Council.

"It was supposed to be a leisurely meeting and we thought we were going to discuss bridges and roads," Vidovich said. "Instead, we stayed for two hours talking about the biggest issue facing the county, which is the fact that some kids are dying from things like OxyContin and heroin. It was a tremendously eye opening experience and since then we have been looking at ways to address this matter."

Good people; bad choices

Statistically, Vidovich said prescription drugs account for three fourths of all drug overdoses in Pennsylvania, and dying of a drug overdose is more likely than succumbing to a motor vehicle accident.

“Where are these drugs coming from?” he asked. “It has been determined that 70 percent of overdoses result from the drugs being obtained from friends and family and 30 percent of deaths result from an individual abusing drugs prescribed by a physician, or from a dealer or internet purchase.”

Calling the matter an “epidemic in the county,” state Rep. Joseph Hackett, R-161 of Ridley Township, a 26-year police veteran, told the Sun Valley parents that he has taken part in various hearings throughout the state.

“We will be voting on a bill that provides for the Good Samaritan Law, which (would provide) protection for those who call to get help for someone who is having a drug overdose,” he said. “Look, we have a serious problem on our hands. This epidemic of prescription drug and heroin abuse is not only here in Delaware County, but in the entire commonwealth.”

Hackett said a good friend died of a drug overdose, adding that he firmly believes his friend would be alive today if the Good Samaritan Law had been in effect.

“If only someone had made that call, my friend would be here today,” Hackett said. “I want the legislature to know that this is an epidemic. At this point I don’t care about the privatization of liquor or about all the other things coming down the road. When our people are dying we need to do something. Take away the stigma, people who get hooked on drugs are not bad people — they are good people that got tripped up and make bad choices.”

Hackett said lawmakers are also trying to bring drug companies to the table to help monitor the flow of prescription pain killers and pass legislation to create a data base to monitor the distribution of drugs at pharmacies.

As Tricia Stouch and her oldest daughter Colleen stood at the podium, a slightly audible sound of crying could be heard. With a video playing in the background, Stouch shared how Pamela, a 2008 Sun Valley graduate, fought and lost her battle with drugs.

The room was intensely quiet as Stouch told of the downward spiral taken by her daughter and how Pamela’s drug abuse affected her entire family and does to this day.

Colleen read an excerpt from her sister’s diary titled “Why I use,” which chronicled Pamela’s addiction and fear of no escape.

Other speakers included Trish Caldwell of the Keystone Recovery Center, who offered parenting strategies; and Darrell Briggs, a Mirmont Treatment Center counselor.

Caldwell said it is very difficult for teens to walk away from friends who are using; friends they have known since elementary school.

“This is a major problem,” she said. “At that age they have a strong desire to fit in and unfortunately will not tell anyone what is happening for fear they will lose longtime friends.”

Caldwell and Briggs both reiterated the message of not being afraid to tell and especially walk away from those who use drugs and alcohol.

Alcohol and marijuana abuse were also discussed.

Guelzow said a third of students surveyed reported they attended parties where alcohol is served to them by their own parent or parents of friends.

“The parents have good intentions and I understand that they are afraid to have their children go out and drink at other places, but if you allow your underage child and their friends to drink at your house, they are more likely to drink elsewhere,” she said. “It is also against the law. My message to parents is to not allow you children and friends to

drink in the house and to keep all prescription drugs out of sight and locked up in a safe place. It is best to teach your child that drinking responsibly is waiting until the age of 21.”

Guelzow also said marijuana is the most commonly abused illicit drug in the United States.

“There are more treatment admissions for marijuana addiction for teens than all the other substances combined,” she said. “Marijuana is addictive because our treatment centers are proving that with intake numbers.”

Heroin Task Force continues mission

With streets flooded with drugs, “Just saying no doesn’t work anymore,” McKenna cautioned the Ridley crowd of about 150 last week. She encouraged parents to be proactive and monitor their child’s cellphones and social media involvements like Facebook.

Whelan and Hackett addressed the Ridley group as well, reiterating points made to the Sun Valley group. The Ridley panel also included members of Delaware County Council, as well as Deputy District Attorney George Dawson and Joseph Ryan, chief of the Delaware County Criminal Investigation Division.

Among those in the audience were at least a dozen coaches. Like teachers, they are on the front lines with students and can often recognize a problem in its early stages, Whelan said.

In its second year, Whelan said the mission of the Heroin Task Force is three fold: prevention, education and awareness. It should not be confused with the Delaware County Drug Task Force, a team of 60 law enforcement officers who investigate drug cases.

“No county is more advanced than Delaware County in fighting the heroin problem,” Hackett said.

Both he and Whelan agreed there is much more to be done.

Hackett referred Pennsylvania as a “main hub” for opioids. Additionally, he said 90 percent of opioids in this country come from Afghanistan. Previously, Hackett referred to heroin as a “homeland security issue.”

In the area of supply and demand, Hackett said “a lot” of the medications being abused by youth and adults alike, come directly out of home medicine cabinets. While legislators are working with doctors on the issue of accessibility, Hackett said, “We’ve yet to bring pharmacists to the table.”

Hackett said he walked away from the Sun Valley forum with some very good input, and was hoping for the same from the Ridley group.

“We don’t know it all folks,” he said.

Part of the 90-minute program included a video titled, “Angela’s Journey,” depicting an interview with a woman who described herself as an outgoing cheerleader before she became a full-blown IV drug user. When she first started smoking marijuana, Angela said it never occurred to her that it would be a problem. Later, Percocet became her drug of choice.

When her dealer didn’t have Percocet and offered heroin instead, Angela said, “That was it, the start of a really bad time for me.”

For more information on the Delaware County Heroin Task Force, visit its website at www.co.delaware.pa.us, click on Heroin Task Force under News and Events. The site provides information on prevention, treatment and recovery, with brochures available for download and key contacts for treatment programs.

On the prosecutorial side, McKenna said, “Eleven years ago, we weren’t prosecuting heroin cases. Now, they are commonplace.” For those willing to gamble their freedom, she said that selling prescription medication can be a “lucrative” business, with a single pill sometimes selling for as much as \$25.

Whelan noted that an Upper Darby man convicted of selling 100 OxyContin pills for \$1,800 in Haverford was sentenced Feb. 4 to serve seven to 20 years behind bars.

For more information about NOPE, call Holcomb Behavioral Health Systems Prevention/Education Department in Media, at 484-444-0412.

Here are some facts about heroin usage, according to Drug Free Pennsylvania:

» It is readily available — if you think it's not, you are in serious denial. Pennsylvania has the third highest instances of heroin use and overdoses in the country.

» It is easy to use — the purer forms of heroin that are now available can be smoked or inhaled; there is no longer the need to inject it.

» It is inexpensive — a "hit" of heroin can be obtained for \$8-\$10 in most parts of Pennsylvania.

» Once someone is addicted to heroin, it is extremely hard to quit. There are several drugs on the market designed to help an addict get off of heroin.

» A detox (3-7 days) only gets the drug out of your system, not out of your mind. Staying clean after detox is a lifelong commitment. A long-term treatment (30-90 days) is often necessary to retrain the addicts' thinking, and lifelong support is generally necessary.

Correspondent Loretta Rodgers also contributed to this report.