



We have to save lives':

Program in Waterbury to help parents prevent drug abuse, addiction

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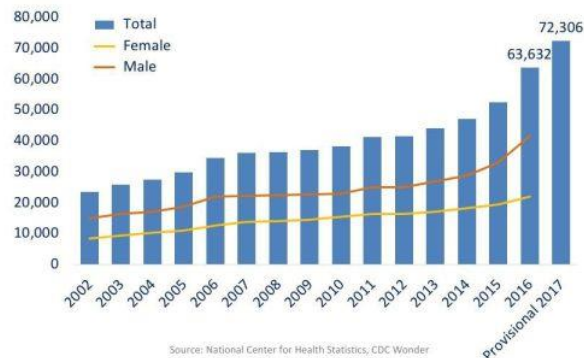
Ginger Katz wants the demand to stop. "There are dealers who are targeting our children," said Katz, whose son, Ian, died of an opioid addiction more than 20 years ago. "Prevention is key. We are focusing on treatment and that is imperative. We have to save lives. But if we don't look at the other side of the problem, we are going to repeat this cycle."

Katz is founder of the Courage to Speak Foundation, a nonprofit organization that tries to educate parents of children about the danger of drugs. On Wednesday, she and her facilitator will bring the group's "Courage to Speak – Courageous Parenting 101" to Waterbury. The two-hour program attempts to give parents the tools and information they need to prevent drug use and addiction in their children.

"There's a crop of children every year in the schools and if we don't educate them, we will repeat the cycle," said Katz, whose son died in 1996. "We know the opioid crisis is an epidemic. Do we want a pandemic?"



National Overdose Deaths Number of Deaths Involving All Drugs



Facilitator Carlos Reinoso will present the program with Katz. The Monroe resident has a master's degree in management and organizational leadership, a bachelor's in psychology and human services and additional training in mental health first aid, Reinoso is fluent in both Spanish and Portuguese.

Last year, more than 72,000 Americans died of drug overdoses, according to federal data. Opioid addiction is among the fastest growing drug problems in the United States, and teenagers are far from immune. In 2016, nearly 4 percent of adolescents aged 12 to 17 reported misusing opioids over the past year.

The vast majority of this misuse is due to prescription opioids, not heroin. The National Institutes of Health reports that while the number of deaths from drug overdose remains relatively low overall, the rate of overdose deaths among adolescents is increasing.

In 2015, 4,235 youth aged 15 to 24 died from a drug related overdose; over half of these were attributable to opioids. However, the health consequences of opioid misuse affect a much larger number of people.

For example, the CDC estimates that for every young adult overdose death, there are 119 emergency room visits and 22 treatment admissions.

The Courage to Speak Foundation receives funding to hold these seminars through a grant from the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Part of that grant comes out of the state's portion of the \$1 billion federal grant the Trump administration awarded to help states fight the opioid epidemic.

Connecticut's portion of that grant was \$5.5 million annually for two years. The New York Times reports that lawmakers are working on another bill to address the problem, which they hope to have on the president's desk by the end of the year.

Katz said her son's death spurred her to investigate drug addiction from a multi-dimensional vantage point. "I am a parent who ripped this problem apart," said Katz, of Norwalk.

After her son's death, Katz and her husband, Larry, teamed with experts in drug prevention to develop drug-prevention education curriculum for teachers and students. Their "Courageous Parenting 101" is an extension of those programs. They founded Courage to Speak Foundation was founded in 1996, shortly after Ian's death.

Since then, the group has developed books and other drug-prevention resources to help break what she calls "the silence and denial that enable drug abuse."

The group's prevention message has been delivered in more than 1,000 presentations to students, parents, teachers, colleges, law enforcement and others across the country and state and at national conferences, including the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America National Youth Conference and Keynote at the National Narcotic Officers Association and the Connecticut PTA's 105th Convention.

Critically, she said, parents need to begin talking about drugs as early as possible. "Knowledge is power. The No. 1 key to prevention is a parent talking to a kid about drugs," said Katz. "And only one-third of parents are doing that."

Although many experts in drug prevention tout the benefits of speaking to children about drugs, many researchers say some parents are giving children the wrong messages. A study from the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids reported that the number of teens who perceive that their parents "would be OK if they smoked marijuana" were more likely to smoke marijuana.

Similarly, the report found that teens who believe their parents would be less concerned about the misuse or abuse of prescription drugs are more likely to misuse or abuse prescription drugs, and teens who believe that their parents "would be okay if they drank beer once in a while," are more likely to drink.

Katz said that when she asks students why teens use drugs, she receives common answers: "Peer pressure, boredom, pain, stress, cause it feels good," she said. She says that parents need to ask themselves: "Why does a child want to feel good? Aren't they feeling good? Be quiet. Let them talk. Communication is listening."

"Tobacco, alcohol and marijuana led Ian to the drugs that killed him," she said. "Drugs change the chemistry of the brain. Err on the cautious side. You want to prevent this from happening. Maybe they need someone to talk to. The philosophy of Courage to Speak is for children to get 3 to 5 adults in their lives that they can share their secrets with and have the courage to speak to because it's OK to ask for help."

The American Pediatric Association reports that 1 out of 5 kids have been drunk by the fifth grade.

Wednesday night's program, Katz said, is for parents of all ages, including those who have already lost children to addiction. For them, her message is simple: "I want to tell you right now, if you are sitting there and any of your children are using drugs, don't feel guilty. Because if you feel guilty about your child using, you're going to stifle your response, so let it go."

"When a parent first thinks their child is using drugs, they go into retreat," Katz said. "They blame themselves. It's denial. They think it's a reflection on their parenting. It isn't."

Instead, Katz said, "Have a conversation." Ask a doctor, town prevention programs and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. "You need to take care of yourself. Having a child that's using drugs can be very stressful. They need help, too."

The Courage to Speak Foundation has alliances and collaborates with local, state and national organizations such as the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, Mid-Fairfield Substance Abuse Coalition and the National Institute on Drug Abuse to offer the program free to parents.

Katz's organization will bring Courageous Parenting 101, "Parenting Through the Opioid Crisis and Beyond" to Woodbury Nov. 28 at Woodbury Middle School and in Torrington on Nov. 1 at a locale to be determined.

The Waterbury program will take place at Riba Aspira Career Academy, 233 Mill St., 3rd Floor, on Sept. 26 from 6 to 8 p.m. [860-882-0236](tel:860-882-0236). For information, visit couragetospeak.org. The Courage to Speak Foundation's office is at 71 East Ave., Suite M, Norwalk. [203-831-9700](tel:203-831-9700).