



Anti-alcohol group tackling teen pot use

MICHAEL WATERSON | Posted: Thursday, February 2, 2012 12:00 am

The Catalyst Coalition, a federally funded anti-alcohol-and-drug program for teens, is tackling Napa County teen marijuana use.

The grassroots group, under the umbrella of Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America and the Napa County Office of Education, spearheaded a countywide ordinance last year that fines adults who host parties where underage drinking occurs. Previously the county and each of the cities addressed the issue individually.

In the case of the new marijuana initiative, the primary focus is to educate parents and students, not impose civil penalties.

The coalition organizes teams in each city comprised of educators, law enforcement, city officials, businesses, parents, students and others to assess the problem and develop a plan specifically addressed to local conditions.

"The teams work to capture the unique issues in each city; the cities are a little different," said Lisa Toller, one of the group's coordinators.

Local teams have already developed anti-marijuana strategies in St. Helena and Calistoga and have begun planning in Napa.

At a meeting on Friday morning at American Canyon High School, Catalyst Coalition members began an AmCan effort to educate students and parents about the dangers of marijuana use by teens.

"According to the 2009 California Healthy Kids Survey, marijuana use (among teens) is up, perception of harm is down," said Toller.

Marijuana use by Napa teens is up 3-5 percent since 2005 according to the survey.

Toller said parents need to be informed that things have changed since they were in high school

"Some parents may have had some experience (with marijuana) back in 70s. It's so much more potent, so much more accessible (today)," Toller said.

Among other disconcerting statistics cited by the group:

- More teens are in treatment with a primary diagnosis of marijuana dependence than for all other illicit drugs combined.
- Heavy marijuana users are more likely than non-users to be diagnosed with schizophrenia later in life. A recent study found that people who had used marijuana more than 50 times before the age of 18, had a threefold increased risk of developing schizophrenia later in life.
- Marijuana use can cause increased heart rate and make some users extremely anxious or paranoid.
- Heavy marijuana use impairs young people's ability to concentrate and retain information.
- The short-term effects of marijuana can include problems with memory and learning.

"There is a need for parent education on the harmfulness (of marijuana) on the developing brain," said Toller.

"The meeting in American Canyon was well attended, with participation by law enforcement, educators, city officials and a student representative," Toller said. "We need to have a cross-section (of the community). If (residents) don't take ownership of the plan, they won't implement it," she said.

The group's \$125,000-per-year federal grant requires matching in-kind donations and expires in 2015.

"Coalition staff are working with the community to determine how to sustain the program beyond federal funding," Jennifer Stewart, development coordinator, wrote in an email.

Enforcement, too, will be part of the strategy. Toller said in St. Helena's case, the team was pushing for a drug sniffing dog on the high school campus.

Toller said a parent seminar would be held something this spring, probably in April.

For more information, go to catalystcoalition.com

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