

OPINION

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ALAN J. MATHIS

The challenge of starting the conversation about substance abuse

There's been a lot in the news lately about heroin making a comeback among drug users. For agencies working to treat people with addiction problems — it never really went away. It just stopped making headlines. For people who are suffering from the disease of addiction, it's all about how easy it is to access a particular substance — crack, prescription drugs, PCP, heroin. What's cheap — what's available. Cities and towns straddling the Interstate-95 corridor are going to be fair game for the sale and distribution of hard drugs which is a problem that knows no boundaries. What many people don't realize is that Connecticut is in the top 10 percent of states with the highest rates of drug abuse.

What is truly disappointing is how much time our agency spends struggling to start a conversation with our youth about alcohol and drugs. No matter how much time

we are in the schools — the occasional hour is not enough. Our young people are getting a different message every hour of every day from an infinite number of sources — from the media to their classmates. What is the answer? Education is the beginning. Engaging parents and the community in an open and honest dialogue has to occur if we are going to change attitudes.

A huge stigma still exists regarding alcoholism and drug addiction. It's the quiet malady no one wants to acknowledge or address, but it is a serious behavioral health issue that goes beyond an uptick in heroin use. Acknowledging that it is a treatable disease and making sure access to treatment is available to everyone who needs it is a start. We pay dearly for turning a blind eye.

The cost to each of us plays out in criminal prosecution, hospital

emergency room treatment, soaring health care needs, and loss of productivity. In a report released in February 2012, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found that federal, state and local governments spent \$74 billion on incarceration, court proceedings, probation and parole for adults with substance abuse problems, but less than 1 percent of that amount, or \$632 million, was spent on prevention and treatment.

September is designated as National Recovery Month. It is a national observance intended to educate Americans that addiction treatment and mental health services can enable those with a mental and/or substance use disorder to live a healthy and rewarding life. At Liberation Programs, every month is recovery month. We are fortunate to see the ongoing transformation of people, who

come to us with lives shattered and broken by addiction, as they begin to heal and start new lives full of hope in recovery.

In our last fiscal year, we served 2,151 different individuals. Think about how many lives this really represents because in addition to those 2,000 plus people, there were wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, and children who were part of a wider circle because substance abuse is not confined to just the individual — it reaches out and affects families and friends as well.

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The answer is not stricter law enforcement, heightened security, or longer terms of incarceration. The problem will not be cured by just saying no to drugs. Communities that, as a whole, understand it is a treatable problem that doesn't single out any particular socio-economic group are on the right path. The answer is out there. It's an open mind.

Alan J. Mathis is resident & CEO of Liberation Programs, Inc. a nonprofit, community-based organization providing substance abuse prevention and treatment programs in Fairfield County.