

Testimony of Margo Austin, M. ED, LADC Tuesday, April 5, 2016

My name is Margo Austin. I am the Student Assistance Program (SAP), Counselor at Burlington High School. I am a Licensed Drug and Alcohol Counselor who has worked in schools with youth for over 22 years. I have worked with middle and high school students ranging in age from 11-22. I coordinated the SAP Program through Spectrum Youth and Family Services serving 19 schools as well as doing adolescent treatment. As an SAP Counselor I have the privilege of talking confidentially to many students about drugs. My job is short-term assessment, intervention, support and referral. I meet with students individually, in small groups and in the classroom setting. I provide on-going education to teachers, parents, community members and youth. I served as a member of Health Impact Assessment (HIA) Committee on marijuana legalization headed up by the Department of Health. Full report was completed in January 2016.

I was asked to provide a picture of the current services in schools. I have broken this up into programs that have been eliminated, programs that have been reduced and recommendations.

Prevention infrastructures/programs that are GONE:

VTLSP/SADD: Vermont Teen Leadership Safety Program and Students Against Destructive Decisions

The purpose of VTLSP/SADD is to support Vermont teens making healthy choices. It provides them with adult support; knowledge of issues such as alcohol/other drug use, traffic safety, and risk taking behaviors; and leadership skills to promote a healthy, safe lifestyle among their peers. VTLSP had chapters in high schools and a statewide group with adult advisors and a state wide advisor to assist schools to bring prevention/leadership/awareness activities into their school communities. Most high schools in Vermont had an active VTLSP/SADD group and now VTLSP does not exist nor the infrastructure that came from statewide agencies (Dept of Education and then Dept of Liquor Control)

GYLC: Governor's Youth Leadership Conference

The conference features nationally recognized key-note speakers, and individual workshops to spread the word that a drug-free lifestyle is the way to go! GYLC focuses on prevention and wellness issues including alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, traffic safety, violence, other risk taking behaviors, and acknowledging diversity. Participants return to their schools and communities empowered to make a difference with increased knowledge, resources, skills, and support.

GMPP: Green Mountain Prevention Project's

Since its inception in 1982, Green Mountain Prevention Projects (GMPP) trained teens to be peer educators and leaders in substance abuse prevention in their schools and communities. Teens are selected from their schools to attend residential training retreats where they learn the skills and information necessary to carry the prevention message to their peers.

Teams from each school work with a school advisor to initiate or implement projects to discourage substance use and encourage a drug free lifestyle. The teens devise projects that are appropriate to the particular needs for their community. These projects range widely including such activities as: peer support groups, mentoring and tutoring programs, Drug Awareness Days/Weeks, cross age teaching, community dialogue nights and other learning opportunities.

Programs housed under GMPP where the Junior High Project, The Teen Institute, Teen Conference and the Adult Institute.

Programs with major reductions:

SAP: Student Assistance Programs

A Student Assistance Program (SAP) is a K-12 school-based, evidence-informed framework for prevention, early intervention, referral and support for students with identified needs that may prevent them from fully benefitting from their educational experience. SAPs focus on building supports for students dealing with non-academic barriers to learning including behavioral health, family and relationship issues as well as other life needs.

Student Assistance Programs originated as a substance abuse prevention and intervention model that has been used for almost 50 years. During that time, the model has changed to provide prevention, early intervention and support services for non-academic issues including mental health, family and other relationship issues, bullying and other school violence issues, and basic life needs, while remaining the primary resource for dealing with substance abuse prevention and early intervention concerns. SAP services vary due to needs and resources available in the schools and communities in which they are applied. Over the years, a number of research studies have shown SAP as an effective approach in the delivery of services that reduce truancy and behavior problems while improving academics and bonding to school as well as increasing referrals to community services at rates higher than reported nationally.

SAP's are often advisors to the following programs; many of these programs would be crippled or eliminated because other school personal do not have the time to become an advisor: VT Teen Leadership Safety Program (VTLSP), VT Kids Against Tobacco (VKAT), Smoking Cessation groups, Our Voices Exposed (OVX), Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD), Project Prom, Project Graduation, Social Norms Campaign-Street Teams. And most SAP's are involved in the Suicide Campaign-UMatter, Life Lines Curriculum.

SAP's provide critical onsite ATOD screening

SAP's provide critical onsite immediate crisis services

SAP's provide immediate consultation to students in distress.

SAP's provide education in the classroom, in groups, to teachers, and parents.

SAP's oversee the Youth Risk Behavior Survey that occurs in schools every two years; and uses this data as a baseline for their work.

The majority of SAP Counselors have NO Job stability year to year because their positions rely on grant funds that are not guaranteed.

Prevention Coalitions :

Prevention Coalitions include community members from all sectors of a community working to raise awareness and solve complex problems realizing it is unfair and unrealistic to expect schools to solve complex drug problems that begin in the community. Many prevention coalitions either have experienced cuts to staff or are no longer in existence.

Vermonters Impact Panel

Members of the Vermonters' Impact Panel are people who have been personally impacted by an impaired driving crash. This program was widely used by schools and had a broad reaching network in schools. It was managed under the umbrella of VTLSP/SADD. I do not know the status of this program now?

ACT 51

Was passed in 1984, a mandatory 2 day teacher training that encompassed many curriculum components for teachers, like pharmacology, signs and symptoms, addicted families, etc. This new legislation supersedes all previous legislation and State Board Rule 4200 specific to ATOD (Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Prevention) Education for school faculty and staff. As of July 1, 2008, "Each superintendent shall determine the content, duration, and frequency of training on issues concerning alcohol and drug abuse for the districts in his or her supervisory union." "The Agency of Education will provide for pre-service and in-service training programs for school personnel on alcohol and drug abuse prevention and on the effects and legal consequences of the possession and use of tobacco products. At least one training program shall be made available in electronic format."

Recommendations in the year 2016

- Prioritize the health and wellness of our youth. Adequately fund prevention, intervention and treatment services. We are not doing this right now. Vermont had way more services in schools and communities approximately 5-7 years ago. We were on the right track...lets bring it back!
- Further decriminalization/restorative justice practices
- Offer treatment, intervention and prevention services in every community
- Revenue Sources?? Alcohol? My understanding is the beer tax has not been raised since the 1980's??
- Challenge the misinformation and mixed messaging and glamorization of marijuana. Challenge with on-going education, accurate information that is consistent and not confusing to everyone- smoking cigarettes is "bad" smoking pot="organic"?!
- Challenge the commercialization/marketing of psycho-active substances with a focus on media literacy and effective/well funded Public Service Announcements (PSA's) that are just as "cool and hip" as a Budweiser ad! The alcohol and tobacco industry spend millions on ads....why? Because they work!
- Implement research based prevention curriculum K-12 delivered to all students
- ACT 51 teacher training reinstate more than 1 "optional" on line training manual
- Comprehensive Parent Education
- Effective/cool Public Service Announcements (PSA's) to impact a skewed perception of harm for marijuana
- Trained, well supported, funded SAP Counselors in every middle and high school in Vermont
- State wide prevention coalitions for youth to join like VTLSP/SADD
- State wide youth leadership Conference that glamorize healthy choices by youth

I also would like to briefly address what I hear as the “myth of inevitability.” I am concerned about a sentiment that explains our need to do this in Vermont because our surrounding neighbors Canada and Massachusetts might legalize as well. In MA, the Republican Gov, Charlie Baker, and Dem AG, Maura Healey, along with Boston Mayor Marty Walsh are throwing their names against the initiative. Every major health group that has chimed in so far is against it. So this is far from inevitable. Secondly, in Canada, they've been talking about it for a while but it isn't anywhere near happening -- and questions are emerging about whether or not it is happening at all anymore. They've found it's much harder to implement than previously thought. For a state that prides itself on being independent and doing what's best for Vermonters this thinking is not in line. Here we are the first state to pass the GMO bill and risk being sued because we felt it was right for Vermonters health and safety.

In closing, I would ask the committee members to deeply consider the current challenges we already face managing the two legal “recreational” drugs we have. When we gain **\$1 in tax revenue for every \$10** we spend dealing with the real costs to society with alcohol and tobacco we are set up to fail.

Addiction is a disease that begins in adolescence. The decision to legalize another psycho-active drug must be done with the vision it will **better the next generation of youth.**

Nothing in my 22 years of addiction training and experience in the field with youth, makes me believe we will reach that goal through legalization.

I know we all care so much for this special state we call home Vermont. I appreciate that these issues are incredibly complex which is why I would urge you to take your time and **do not rush to legalize another addictive, psycho-active substance.** I know we all want what is best for Vermont youth and adults when it comes to health and safety!

Thank you!
Margo Austin