

NORTH EAST INDEPENDENT

Local drug programs seeing rise in alcohol, drug use

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EAST GREENWICH — The East Greenwich Drug Program is 30 years old and it still hasn't finished its work, judging from its own reports and those of outside agencies.

Use of illegal drugs at East Greenwich High School remained steady, averaging 24 percent of the student body from the 1997-98 to 2007-08 school years, according to the annual SALT surveys compiled by the Rhode Island Department of Education.

In more recent findings, the SurveyWorks Student Survey in 2011-12 found 35 percent of East Greenwich High School smoked marijuana, slightly less than the 38 percent statewide average. Just over 10 percent used oxycontin, codeine, percocet or vicodin without a doctor's prescription, compared to 12.4 percent statewide.

Kids Count, a private children's policy and advocacy organization that compiles data about the health and wellness of children, reported in 2012 that 7 percent of East Greenwich middle school students drank alcohol and 39 percent of high school students consume alcohol; at the middle school, 1 percent used marijuana and 40 percent of high school students used marijuana.

Looking at drug and alcohol use by high school students, Kids Count found that East Greenwich had higher numbers than statewide averages: 39 percent of high schoolers in East Greenwich reported using alcohol, compared to 21 percent statewide. Forty percent reported using drugs, compared to the 39 percent statewide average.

Bob Houghtaling, director of the drug program since its inception, said, "In general we do better than state norms. We are not perfect and we have some

work to do. But all in all we have created a pretty good network of support."

Nevertheless, Houghtaling still worries about illegal drug use at the high school and the middle school. In a year-to-date comparison between 2012 and 2013, 224 clients were referred to the program a year ago, and until last week 178 had been seen.

In 2012, the drug program recorded alcohol as a primary concern of 48 clients under the age of 18; to date this year, 26 clients have been seen. Drug use was a primary concern for 33 clients under 18 in 2012, and so far in 2013, for 29 clients. Mental health issues were a concern for 41 clients under 18 in 2012, and so far this year, 29.

Referrals to the drug program come from various sources, including the police department and the town's Juvenile Hearing Board, the school district, the court system, parents and self-referrals.

A year ago, Houghtaling reported to the School Committee and the Town Council that the misuse of prescription drugs is a growing concern. "Of the total 44 primary drug clients, 11 were seen for prescription medications and many seen for poly drug use, which is a combination of drugs taken at one time, such as tequila combined with painkillers," he said.

The Drug Program offers more than 40 prevention and education services to the town's youth, from a Youth to Youth

field trips and three hayrides.

A former Teen Center attendee, Jonathan Whitkin, 31, has returned to the program as a volunteer.

"I see a lot of myself when I see these kids," Whitkin said. "This gives them a chance to speak freely and open up. They tell me stuff they wouldn't tell anyone else."

Whitkin overcame his own struggle with substance abuse, so he often knows what a kid is struggling with when Houghtaling suggests the teen talk to him. Whitkin is not a counselor, he is a real estate consultant, but he knows that a good game of hoops outside the school is good medicine and the ultimate ice breaker.

The drug program began as a result of a traffic fatality that killed 13-year-old Todd Morsilli while he was walking on a road near his home. An East Greenwich High School student was driving under the influence when her car struck the youth.

The boy's death galvanized the town about the burgeoning problem of teen drinking and illegal drug use. The drug program, a town-funded initiative, was created in response. Houghtaling, who holds a master's degree in education, receives a \$70,000 salary. The program is supported by a \$20,000 grant from the state, and the Teen Center is allocated \$10,000 in the town budget.

The program has grown over the years, said Rob Lindberg, who attended the Teen Center when he was in high school. He volunteers at the center now and assists Houghtaling.

"I'll tell you how effective the Drug Program is. I still don't smoke, drink or dip [chew tobacco] or use drugs," said Lindberg, 36, an Army veteran. "When I was in the

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Summer Conference, which will be held at the University of Rhode Island this year, to a weekly Teen Center held on Friday nights at Eldredge Elementary School that draws some 30 teens each week. The Teen Center held 16 movie nights in 2012, eight pizza parties, nine