

Townwide Meeting Held on Youth Substance Abuse

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Photo by Kelly Smith/The Guilford Courier

Detective Tim Bernier of the Guilford Police Department shares firsthand information on what's going on in the town with youth substance abuse.

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Families Get Facts, Support on Drug Issues

Parents seeking to educate themselves on youth substance abuse had an opportunity to have their questions answered on April 18. Organized by Developmental Assets for Youth (DAY), more than 60 residents preregistered for this informational meeting, hoping to get educated on the facts in town.

The 2½-hour meeting was held in three parts. First, Guilford Detective Tim Bernier spoke to the community on alcohol and drug issues facing Guilford. Then, Stephanie Moran from the Governor's Prevention Partnership provided the crowd with unique insight into statistics on the state level and compared those to Guilford, and last the professionals and DAY members opened the meeting to a panel discussion in which the crowd was encouraged to participate.

"I want to stress how important these issues are as a parent of children in Guilford myself. There's so many hopes and aspirations that you have for your children as you watch them grow," DAY volunteer David Melillo said. "We want them to get through high school and to get through college and have them not face some sort of tragedy."

DAY was organized in an effort to build a healthier environment for Guilford's youth. Volunteers, parents, youth, community leaders, and law enforcement officials make up this group aimed at reducing high-risk behaviors. In 2009, DAY surveyed Guilford youths from 7th to 12th grade to gather perspective on what's occurring in today's younger community. Prevention coordinator Dana Pelliccio was present at the meeting as well as two youth members, Katie Van Steenberg and Peter Ott. Pediatrician Pamela Murtagh and social worker Andy Buccaro were also available for questions.

Addressing Availability

Detective Moran, whose passion lies in working on narcotic cases, addressed the crowd in an effort to get rid of any preconceived notions that drug use doesn't occur in this small shoreline community.

"The truth of the matter is drugs exist here in Guilford. Everything's here-we're not immune to anything in this town. I've made arrests on just about every type of drug you can have," Moran said. "If it's not available here, it's a 15-minute drive away to New Haven and it's being brought here."

Moran explained that alcohol, marijuana, and prescription pills are the most prevalent substances in town. He also elaborated on the April 14 liquor compliance check that was conducted in town. Fourteen establishments in town were visited-one of which was closed and 10 of which refused sale to the minors. Those that completed sales were Splash Restaurant, the Whole Enchilada, and Shoreline Wine Merchant.

Through the Liquor Control Division, Guilford Police Department, the Governor's Prevention Partnership, and with grant support from DAY, trained minors were instructed to stop in different restaurants and package stores in town.

"The minors are trained very well in what they're doing and we send them into our package stores and our bars and they order alcohol and you'd be unfortunately amazed on how many people still sell them alcohol," the detective said. "These kids do not look 21-they have IDs that say they are 17. They're not pretending to be any older than who they are."

Moran from the Governor's Prevention Partnership works with 33 grant-funded communities in Connecticut as a technical assistance partner, doing research and keeping organizations successful in educating the community on youth problems.

She said compliance checks throughout the state have been conducted in 489 establishments this year, with the state failure rate at 20.6 percent. After the 13 checks were conducted in Guilford, the current failure rate for the town is 23.08 percent, higher than the state average.

"You're not the worst, but you're not the lowest either. That's something to think about and work on because prevention is a community effort," Moran said. "You may have heard that saying that it takes a community to raise a child, and that's true-it takes a lot of watchful eyes, a lot of people, and a lot of involvement from the community in order to make sure youth are safe."

Suggestions in order to keep your children and the children in the community safe and out of harm's way included maintaining a healthy, open relationship with your kids, which includes educating and talking to them early about the negative effect of drugs, alcohol, and other reckless behavior. Also mentioned was getting youth involved with activities outside school and home, including sports and healthy hobbies. Professionals noted that it's important to have consequences for those who choose to participate in illegal behavior, letting them know that that behavior is not allowed.

For more information about the meeting or DAY, call 203-453-8047 or email Pelliccio at pellicciod@ci.guilford.ct.us