



Community Planning Council

The Community Planning Council was established by Greenwich United Way to encourage the most effective and efficient health and human service delivery system for Greenwich. Comprised of community leaders, nonprofit service professionals, Greenwich United Way board members, and community volunteers, the work of the Planning Council, particularly through its periodic Needs Assessments, has led to the development of some of the Town's most valued programs and institutions.

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Community Planning Council Meeting Tuesday 3/20, 8:30am, Temple Shalom

Mental Health/Substance Abuse: National Opiate Epidemic: A Different Perspective and New Opportunity

Cary Ostrow, Chief Operating Officer, Liberation Programs

According to the Greenwich United Way's Needs Assessment, there has been a significant increase in the incidence of mental health issues and substance abuse problems among residents of all ages.

Highlights from the Presentation:

- **Misperceptions:** Mr. Ostrow noted that it was helpful to distinguish between drug dependence, which entails adaptation to use, vs. drug addiction, which is a chronic disease, characterized by compulsive drug use despite harmful consequences. He noted that the media has highlighted a number of trends such as the quadrupling of heroin deaths between 2000 and 2015 as evidence of an opioid crisis, particularly among youth. However, with the number of heroin and opioid deaths being about 50% of alcohol-related deaths in 2016, this points to the overall problem being one of addiction. In CT in 2016, 32% of opioid-related deaths were over the age of 50 vs. 20% ages 17-29. The issue of prescription painkillers has been misinterpreted. Only 2% of Americans prescribed an opioid in 2016 develop a prescription pain relief disorder; however, of those who do, 75% of those have a prior addiction history. The surge in youth suicide rates in the past 10 years reflects the intensifying pressures on our youth, contributing to mental health and addiction problems. In fact, the abuse of drugs in the US has a long history, dating back to the 19th century, and has gone through periodic 20-year cycles. Since 1906, there have been a series of laws enacted to bolster law enforcement and impose minimum mandatory sentences for certain drug abuses. Despite these laws, drug addiction continues to be a major problem.
- **Challenges:** Mr. Ostrow noted that the epidemic has continued despite these legal and enforcement efforts for several reasons: 1) the focus should be more on the demand for drugs (i.e., why people use them), not the supply; 2) about 10% of the population is vulnerable to addiction; 3) altering one's mood to feel better is part of the human condition and helps drive each and every "epidemic"; 4) new drugs are being manufactured; and 5) cultural norms up to now have attributed a number of societal problems to drug use. Whereas the US represents 5% of the world's population, it consumes 80% of the world's heroin and 80% of its prescription pain medications.
- **Policy Options:** Mr. Ostrow discussed a number of policy actions and strategies that would be a more effective response to addressing addiction. He noted that this policy response should be grounded in science and data and that it will require a change in cultural norms. This would require providing easy and affordable access to treatment and the end of criminalization of drug addiction. The focus of youth education should be on fostering emotional stability in our youth, rather than demonizing drugs.
- **Treatment services:** Liberation Programs serves about 1,200 people per day. Mr. Ostrow noted that one of the challenges is that insurance often severely restricts the amount of reimbursement and/or the number of therapy sessions.

Next Community Planning Council Meeting:

Tuesday, 4/14, 8:30 am, Site visit to The Nathaniel Witherell (70 Parsonage Road, Greenwich, CT 06830)

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