

Five towns target substance abuse

By Jon Brodtkin / Daily News Staff
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Five MetroWest and Milford area communities will target drug and alcohol abuse in high schools and middle schools in a new \$1 million initiative developed by the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation.

The initiative, the foundation's largest since it formed in 1999, is an attempt to prevent substance abuse, identify those at greatest risk of addiction and improve access to treatment for kids with drug and alcohol problems.

The foundation aims to bring the best practices from around the country to area towns, many of which use substance abuse programs that have not been proven effective, said Martin Cohen, foundation president.

"A lot of these communities, they've been trying to address substance abuse," Cohen said. "A lot of it is hit-or-miss. It wasn't based on the science. It didn't involve the evidence-based best practices."

The grant recipients, announced yesterday, include Framingham, Hopkinton, Needham and Wayland. A fifth grant was also awarded to Milford and Bellingham, which are pursuing a joint program.

The five grants are \$200,000 each and will be distributed over three years. The foundation has also contracted with the Boston-based Education Development Center Inc., to provide technical assistance to the communities. Brandeis University's Schneider Center for Behavioral Health will evaluate the foundation's project.

Drug and alcohol use is widespread in Massachusetts, according to a risk behavior survey of high school students released by state officials last year. In the 30 days prior to being surveyed, nearly half of students had consumed alcohol and more than a quarter engaged in binge drinking, defined as consuming five or more drinks within two hours.

Nearly half of students reported having used an illegal drug at least once. Marijuana was the most commonly used substance.

"Substance abuse crosses over all boundaries," said Jill Leach, wellness coordinator for the Hopkinton school system. "It's a typical problem that most communities see with teenage youth."

In Milford and Bellingham, there have been a number of kids arrested for crimes related to substance abuse, and officials at the juvenile court say they are concerned, said Judy Bolandz, director of the Wayside Community Counseling Center in Milford.

Bolandz wrote the grant proposal for Milford and Bellingham. She said the towns plan to complete a comprehensive needs assessment and then develop a community-wide coalition involving schools, police, health boards, parents and probation officers, to combat substance abuse.

"Everyone's trying to do the best they can in their own areas, but we really haven't linked everyone with each other," she said.

Much of the new grant program's resources will be aimed at middle schools. The Framingham school system plans to increase screening and intervention for middle school students who show signs of substance use, while Hopkinton will implement a new prevention curriculum in the middle school.

Research suggests substance abuse prevention initiatives can have the most impact at the middle school level, with refresher programs for high school students, Cohen said.

"I think it's still new (for middle-schoolers)," he said. "They may be more prone to experimentation at a younger age, peer pressure factors may be different."

