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Guest columnists: Franklin County ready to tackle youth substance abuse

By Amelia Berry, Charles Kendall and Judy Mattingly Guest columnists Oct 15, 2019 Updated Oct 15, 2019



Amelia Berry

On behalf of Yes Arts, the Franklin County Agency for Substance Abuse Policy (ASAP) and the Franklin County Health Department (FCHD), we would like to thank the community for its extraordinary support and engagement during the recent substance abuse prevention summit. More than 300 people attended "Just Say Yes" sessions led by internationally renowned addiction expert Dr. Harvey Milkman.

We invited Dr. Milkman to Frankfort with the goal of equipping a wide range of local stakeholders with information about research-based strategies for preventing youth substance use. Armed with this information, Franklin County can move forward with a plan to reduce rates of use over time. This is a herculean task, but one we believe our community is ready to take on.

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We have lost far too many young people to overdose, imprisonment and squandered potential due to addiction. We have watched with alarm as violent crime rates have risen. Our resources have been overwhelmed trying to address the problem on the back end, including through the estimated 90% of local criminal cases that are drug-related.

But we are not just ready because we're fed up. Franklin County has already embraced the type of collaborative action necessary for a communitywide prevention strategy to work. Our ASAP board, which consists of representatives from law enforcement, health care, education, business, social services and treatment centers, is recognized as a leader in the state for its effective collaborative work on harm reduction strategies.

Franklin County is also home to one of the first nationally accredited health departments in the country. FCHD has been recognized with several model practice awards, including for its work with over 120 local partners for the Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnership process.

In addition to strong public health infrastructure, a growing network of innovative programs demonstrate a collective hunger for better outcomes for our youth. Standouts include the Wanda Joyce Robinson Foundation (providing support to children impacted by parents' incarceration); the Kings Center's HeartBEATS program (beat-making program providing artistic expression and mentorship for youth); WeWannaPlay and Yes Arts Youth (expanding access to youth sports and arts, respectively); faith-based prevention initiatives at First Corinthian Baptist, New Harvest and other local churches; and growing efforts in both school districts to support students' social-emotional health.

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These programs signal community readiness to support youth in new ways and bode well for a coordinated prevention effort. Indeed, Dr. Milkman — who has visited countless communities around the country and world — remarked repeatedly on the exceptional quality of Franklin County in this regard.

This paper's recent cartoon likening the summit to spooning water from the ocean underscores the hopelessness many in our community feel about the drug problem. The magnitude and complexity of the problem make changing course feel overwhelming if not impossible.

What we learned at the summit was that changing the trajectory for the next generation is eminently possible.

Certainly, our children need us to be realistic. They need us to be deliberative, pragmatic and responsible with our resources. But what they don't need — indeed, what they cannot afford — is for us to be cynical.

Will the current epidemic, with its obituaries and rap sheets and drug-deals-gone-bad, be enough to shake us out of our fatalism and into purposeful action? As anyone who attended the recent summit can tell you, it already has.

This is the first in a two-part series about preventing youth substance use. The second installment will recap strategies presented at the summit and previews next steps. Amelia Berry is executive director of Yes Arts. Charles Kendall is board coordinator of Franklin County ASAP. Judy Mattingly is executive director of the Franklin County Health Department.

Tags: Substance Abuse, Yes Arts, Agency For Substance Abuse Policy, Franklin County Health Department, Franklin County, Charles Kendall, Amelia Berry, Judy Mattingly, Law Enforcement, Social Services, Kings Center, Harvey Milkman

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