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Catching it early

From reactive to proactive, Bowen Center goes to root of problem.

By VIRGINIA RANSBOTTOM
Tribune Staff Writer

PLYMOUTH — In the bout with the methamphetamine epidemic, the Marshall County Bowen Center has stepped into the ring.

The plan is to get there before the problem begins.

“I can’t think of any one person whose first experience with substance abuse started with meth,” Bowen Center director Rob Ryan told the mayor’s anti-meth committee last week.

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“You’ll find that the gateway was cigarettes, alcohol or marijuana when describing their life story on why they started drugs,” he said. “It’s all intertwined.”

While the community mental health center will never be able to keep up with business, a shift of focus was needed to flip to the preventative side of the equation.

By the end of this month, all sixth- or seventh-graders in Marshall County will be taught Life Skills Training (LST) classes.

“We’re not going to treat the problem by waiting for someone to come through the door,” Ryan said. “We’ve taken a change in direction by stopping the problem before it starts.”

To introduce the LST pilot program, the Bowen Center received a \$6,500 grant from the Marshall County Local Coordinating Council for a Drug Free Indiana (LCC).

Implemented in 13 elementary, middle and junior high schools, students will receive four to eight LST sessions throughout the year during resource or study hall time.

Some seventh-graders not receiving the training in sixth grade will be included.

Created by Gilbert Botvin, a leading prevention expert at Cornell University, LST is a substance abuse prevention program based on more than 20 years of scientific research with elementary and

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On top of teaching the dangers of drug abuse, LST teaches healthy behavior, alternatives to help resist peer pressure. It builds self-esteem and copes with anger and anxiety.

Take the lack of personal self-management skills and general social skills, combine it with peer pressure and you have a recipe for a kid's first experience with substance abuse.

"It sounds like common sense, but common sense isn't so common anymore," Ryan said.

Follow-up results compared students who did not receive LST to those who did.

Students who received LST had an 87 percent higher reduction rate in tobacco use, 60 percent reduction in alcohol and 75 percent reduction in poly drugs.

New to the study was meth usage, showing a 68 percent reduction.

While the DARE program might be an effective tool for third- and sixth-graders to abstain from drugs, there are no follow-up studies to measure its success.

Ryan says the scared-straight approach, showing pictures throughout a 10-year time span of the deteriorating health of a meth addict, doesn't work with sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders.

"To them, 10 years is a long time," he said. "They look at the pictures and see someone who got old."

To introduce LST to students, Plymouth Police Chief Jim Cox offered to combine LST with the sixth-grade DARE program.

Ryan said sixth grade is just the beginning. LST has the potential to continue through ninth grade and train 10th- through 12th-graders to be LST mentors.

"It could take a while to get traction, but it could be self-perpetuating," Ryan said.

Ryan introduced the program to the Plymouth mayor's anti-meth commission.

"What citizens miss about all these meth busts in our area is that they wouldn't hear about it unless the police were working hard to make the busts.

"The thing is, instead of people getting frustrated and looking to law enforcement to do something to stop it, they can do something themselves by joining the LLC."

The LLC is an open group of volunteers working to reduce drug use in the county.

LLC also provides indigent care and treatment and meets at 9 a.m. the last Tuesday of the month in the Plymouth library.

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