

Community Economic Growth Tied to Substance Abuse Prevention and Strategic Framework

By Dawne Y. Simmons

Community coalitions understand that to truly create healthy communities, they must not only focus on specific social issues but also look at how those issues affect the entire community.

While professionals in the fields of prevention, treatment and related services understand the connection between drug use and community factors such as economic growth, school effectiveness, neighborhood safety and overall health, the rest of the community may need them to connect the dots before they see the impact.

According to Salvador Garza of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, “There’s an awakening on the part of society, which understands that effective drug prevention programs are a sound social investment to sustain viable economic development success. This framework of success will show the important contribution that drug prevention provides and will be a growing trend that economic development professionals should understand and embrace in the future development of their business attraction and retention strategies.”

Garza said these effective practices will increase the probability of community success by minimizing drug usage, which otherwise can impede the potential growth of business and industry. “Today’s businesses are challenged by drug use, as a significant percentage of job applicants fail the first step to gainful employment – the drug test,” he said. “Businesses must begin looking at the future trends of drug use within the available pool of job candidates.” Garza said this information can be used to make decisions about business expansion as well as retention. “This is becoming a greater challenge for communities, especially in rural areas, as they seek to attract new businesses,” he added.

A city in trouble

Consultant Laurie Sutter knows about the economic challenges communities can face from her work with coalitions in Flint, Michigan. Sutter works on the state and local levels to build systems that serve the needs of communities.

Flint was hit hard when thousands lost their jobs as a result of an economic downturn. The city lost its place as a long-time auto manufacturing hub. Substance abuse skyrocketed and crime rose, earning the city of just 100,000 people the mantle of third most dangerous city in America. For its citizens, it became an unhealthy and dangerous place to live.

“We had a population with significant substance abuse behaviors, so people weren’t equipped to go into the workforce and new industry doesn’t want to send jobs to high-crime areas,” Sutter said. “In addition, with Flint’s high drop-out rate, fueled by substance

abuse, the labor force became even more unattractive to perspective employers.”

Sutter assisted Flint coalition leaders with key tactics to help them transition from fragmented past approaches to community building to a multi-disciplinary system approach that has ownership and investment at the highest levels to work toward a common purpose.

“Getting them to understand how to go from silos to a multi-disciplinary approach was accomplished by repeating the message again and again, and introducing them to time-tested tools and resources,” said Sutter. We helped them develop clear roles and expectations, clear decision-making processes and conflict resolution skills.” She also helped identify neutral content experts for ongoing assistance.

Flint has chosen to focus on its escalating problem of alcohol-related traffic stops and underage drinking. It is a goal that is locally actionable and can be tracked by data; they focused specifically on alcohol-related car crashes involving the deaths of males age 21 to 25. The victims were drivers, passengers, pedestrians and even bicyclists.

“The results so far are promising,” Sutter said. “Flint is getting ready to launch its strategic plan for substance abuse. Over the past year, there’s been big growth on the community level in terms of people getting involved, resources and new partners. They’re building a prevention system that is unified, multi-sectored, partnering with law enforcement, education and public health,” described Sutter.



A city of hope

“There’s new hope,” Sutter said of Flint’s efforts to turn the city around. “When we started, there was not a lot of hope. They have accepted that General Motors is not coming back. The town is coming together across sectors to deal with substance abuse, which affects so many aspects of the community, including the economy.”

Another example of an effective planning process is Otoe County, Nebraska. The county’s efforts were funded through drug-free community monies, and Sutter worked with them with some of the same prevention system assessments used in Flint. As a result, the county cut its’ drunk driving arrests in half, lowered the age of initial alcohol use and documented reductions in alcohol sales.

“For communities, relationships rather than positions of power are the most critical levers for change,” Sutter said. “You need to build credible trustworthy relationships with a broad range of people in all sectors of the community.”

** Sources cited in this article can be found online at prevention.org/forummagazine/currentissue*

Simmons is Contributing Editor for Prevention Forum.