



The Strategic Prevention Framework:

Changing the Way We Define Our Work

By David Zoeller

Changes in the way the federal government is funding prevention are going to enhance the efforts of substance abuse prevention providers in Illinois, according to Beverly Watts Davis, director of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

Davis was one of the keynote speakers at the Illinois Prevention Conference in Oak Brook in June, and she offered a new perspective on how prevention should be viewed. She stressed that when prevention providers focus on the issue of substance abuse in their community, they are also addressing interrelated issues such as treatment, crime prevention, violence prevention, family strengthening, and community and economic development.

"What you do impacts all of those things," Davis told nearly 800 conference attendees. "If somebody asks what you do, you are not limited or defined by the grant that you have. Most of you, when people ask what you do, talk about who your funding source is...that's how you describe yourself." There's a lot more to describing the work of prevention, she said.

In the coming year, Davis said, SAMHSA will be looking at funding prevention in a more comprehensive way. "Instead of making people apply for a prevention grant, a treatment grant, and a mental health grant that will serve a population, we're going to put all the money into one grant and you can spend it the way you need to for comprehensive services," she explained.

She urged prevention providers to keep SAMHSA's vision, "A Life in the Community for Everyone," in mind as they look for ways to expand their services to reach more people. For instance, she said, "If you say that crime prevention is all you're about, you're always going to find the

same people at the table. Other people will not understand that they have a role in that. But when you say that you're about safe and healthy communities, everybody in your community has a place at your table."

Getting more people to the table is what led SAMHSA to create the Strategic Prevention Framework, which advances community-based programs for substance abuse prevention and mental health promotion. The Framework stresses the importance of using public health research findings and applying this knowledge, along with evidence-based prevention programs that promote mental health and prevent substance abuse, to build healthier communities. It uses a five-step process known to promote youth development, reduce risk-taking behaviors, build on assets and prevent problem behaviors across the lifespan:

- (1) Profile needs and response capacity.
- (2) Mobilize and build needed capacity.
- (3) Develop a comprehensive strategic plan.
- (4) Implement evidence-based prevention programs, policies and strategies.
- (5) Evaluate program effectiveness, sustaining what has worked well.

"This [Strategic Prevention Framework process] is not new," Davis said. "This is about a very evidence-based, time-and-time-again, proven-effective strategy that will support any prevention planning process. The most important thing that we are doing to support this," she noted, "is to support how you all operate at the community level, starting with a real, true assessment of what is it you are doing."

Davis acknowledged that providers have to be concerned about risk and protective factors. "It is important that you think about the problem you have and decide what risk and protective factors move to that, and not the other way around. Otherwise, you're going to find those risk factors are going to point to about seventeen different problems that you have and you could end up dividing your efforts seventeen different ways," she cautioned.

What SAMHSA wants providers to do, Davis said, is understand the problem they are going after and then look at the risk factors associated with that problem. "That is how you are actually going to address and reduce that problem, and more importantly, understand what community epidemiology is all about. What it really is about is understanding our data."

Davis used her own experience in the San Antonio, Texas area as an example, noting the community was able to drastically reduce crime and impact related issues by learning how to use locally-collected data to ensure that prevention dollars were being spent in parts of the community where they would do the most good. SAMHSA has also made a contribution to reducing the rate of HIV infections across the country, again by using local data and learning to focus resources, Davis said.

Davis has made it a goal to see that every state has a Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant (SIG). Nineteen states (including Illinois) and two territories have already been awarded a SIG, and five more will be awarded before this year is out, Davis said. "It's about identifying your problem, making the case for real, local data, and then supporting your plan to address it for the long haul, not just the short term," she said.

"You are the heroes in this country," Davis told the group. "You are in the business of creating healthy and safe communities."

Zoeller is a contributing editor to Prevention Forum.

