

## **Medford's Drug Free Communities Project: Prevention is Key.**

By Gisela Rots

In previous columns, we have shared some general information about our coalition and our Environmental Health initiatives. This month, I'd like to further introduce you to our Youth Substance Abuse Prevention projects.

As mentioned before, MHM received a grant from SAMHSA (the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) as a part of their Drug Free Communities programs. Part of the grant requires us to match the grant money with either financial or in-kind contributions. So far, our coalition has been touched by the out-pouring of help from the community – from the Housing Authority to the Malden Y, from the Chamber of Commerce to the Public Schools, from the Police to the health-service community and so many more!

The SAMHSA funds are for prevention efforts. You may be asking yourself what exactly that means? There is no easy answer. Suffice it to say that we will be focusing on trying to *prevent* youth from ever trying or using drugs. And by drugs, we mean alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, methamphetamines (meth or crystal meth), heroin, OxyContin and other prescribed medications, etc – you get the general idea. But why prevention and not treatment? The SAMHSA programs, which include MHM's Drug Free Communities project, focus on prevention, at least partially because it is the most cost-effective. There is clearly a need for intervention and treatment as well, but unfortunately those will not be our focus.

In order to have the highest impact in the community, we are following a strategic planning process. This planning process includes collecting data, increasing people's knowledge about the problem, implementing projects and evaluating our progress to find out whether we are creating the changes we set out to do (and if not, then altering our projects to try to attain our goals). One of our main partners in this process is the Northeast Center for Healthy Communities ([www.nc4hc.org](http://www.nc4hc.org)), which provides both evaluation and assistance throughout the project.

The question is, how exactly do you go about trying to *prevent* youth from ever using drugs? If you do a Google search for prevention, you'll be overwhelmed with responses. SAMHSA, however, has a list of programs that it believes work best. Many of these program are "environmental" prevention strategies.

Again, what in the world does THAT mean? In a nut-shell, it means we'll be focusing efforts that will change the environment, such as reducing access to alcohol and other drugs; strengthening local community and school polices regarding alcohol and other drugs; and raising awareness in the community about alcohol and other drugs and changing common misperceptions about drugs. The key, here, though, is the idea that it is the environment that we are trying to change, not the individual youth. By focusing on the environment, we can have a greater impact on the community, and the effects can be longer-lasting.

One of the ways that we began the planning process and gathering information about which environmental strategies may work in Medford, was by conducting a survey in the schools. As a part of the Communities That Care Youth Surveys that we conducted in the schools in February 2004, students were asked about the people who surround them, as well as their surroundings themselves – their peers, their families, their schools and their community as a whole. Some of the questions they were asked include, how safe do the students feel in their neighborhoods; do their families move around a lot; how often, if ever, do they attend religious service; how do people in schools and the community feel about them (are they proud, etc). These questions allow us to analyze the health of the surrounding community, as well as how likely a child is to come into

contact with any drugs. Questions such as these give us an idea of how Medford, as a community, helps protect its residents against drug abuse, also called protective factors, and help us identify what we should be focusing on, although the system is clearly not fool-proof.

Although Medford's overall score on the protective factors was comparable to that of communities similar to Medford, there are a few items we have identified as areas of concern, such as students' social skills, students' feelings of security within their neighborhoods and the opportunities they have to get involved in the community.

This latter point is an important one. Giving youth the opportunity to get involved with the people around them (neighbors, co-workers, peers, government, etc) not only benefits them by giving them the opportunity to have a positive impact on those around them, but it also gives them something to contribute and allows them to develop their own skills.

In prevention, these are all important factors. At MHM, we are beginning to address some of these factors, while still researching the current state of the drug abuse culture. We have begun a Youth Advisory Council, with whom we meet once a week, and whom help both give feedback and create projects for us to work on. They have critiqued a new alcohol education program, served as a focus group for MADD's new media presentation and have identified what it is that they love, and hate, about their community. They will also help us to find out how and where youth access alcohol, which they've been trained to do by MADD.

In the coming months we'll begin outlining some simple steps that YOU, as a parent, as a neighbor, as a member of the Medford community, can take to help prevent youth from delving into the dark world of substance abuse, and help them make positive choices. In the meantime, next time you see a neighborhood kid, a friend's daughter or your own nephew, how about telling them how happy you are that they are a part of your family and your community?

*Coming later this month: MHM will help Massachusetts on the Move celebrate the National Day of Action on September 28. Be on the lookout for more information on an opportunity to take a walk with your community leaders, starting around noontime on the steps of City Hall.*

***This is Mother's Against Drunk Driving (MADD)'s Current Call To Action!***

***If you'd like to help Fight Underage Drinking, here's how YOU can get involved!!***

As a part of their Back-To-School Campaign, JC Penney and other department stores have advertised T-shirts featuring logos for Jack Daniels, Budweiser, and other alcoholic beverage brands. If you are opposed to the alcohol-industry using this as a form of advertising, here are a few things YOU can do:

1. Write to the national headquarters of JC Penney to complain about this blatant marketing of alcohol to youth. The person to contact is: Myron E. Ullman, III, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, JC Penney Corporation, Inc., 6501 Legacy Drive, Plano, Texas 75024. In your letters, include information about how underage drinking affects your community, and how marketing products such as the T-shirts contribute to underage drinking.
2. Visit [Hwww.marinstitute.org/talkback](http://www.marinstitute.org/talkback)H to register a complaint with the makers of Budweiser, Jack Daniels, Miller Lite, Guinness and any other brands featured in "back-to-school" clothing. This is an automated complaint center.

*Gisela Rots is Project Coordinator for the Drug Free Communities project with Medford Health Matters. She can be reached at [gamrots@glfhc.org](mailto:gamrots@glfhc.org) or 978.618.4533.*