


Coalition redefining the notion of 'normal'

By ANGEL ROY
Staff Writer

An estimated 34 percent of local young people have consumed an alcoholic drink in the past month. Between 2 and 4 percent have smoked cigarettes. Less than 2 percent have used illegal drugs.

"One reason that children drink, smoke cigarettes or use drugs is because they have the idea that most children do it, when that is actually not true," said Liz Hennig, coordinator of the Sullivan County

 **Claremont** Community Coalition and its Communities United for Substance Abuse Prevention initiative, which compiled the statistics

The coalition, Hennig said, is spreading the word about accurate social norms throughout the community and plans to bring the message to local high schools in 2010 as part of a strategic plan established in 2008.

"The idea of a social norms campaign is to let people know that the norm is not to use," Hennig said. "Most people do not use, most people make the right choices, most people do the right thing."

The coalition compiles statistics regarding substance abuse among local youth using various surveys, student focus groups and police data.

"A lot of people say that surveys do not tell the

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truth, some say students exaggerate or are afraid to say what they are doing," Hennig said. "Our surveys are designed with counter questions so we can validate the answers and look for inconsistencies so we can assess that what we are doing is effective."

The coalition's findings show there is a history of multi-generational drug use in Sullivan County and a mindset that accepts alcohol and drug use among miners, minimizes the risks associated with use and enhances the ability of young people to access drugs and alcohol,

according to the coalition's Web site. The group's future work focusses on realigning perceptions of risk in the community.

Hennig said the coalition is made up of "very active community members" that determine issues the organization should address, the factors that contribute to those issues and potential solutions for alleviating the contributing factors.

"We have to know what the problem is and have to know, for the local area, what is the most effective way to deal with the problem," Hennig said.

The group has dozens of mem-

bers, including police officers, teachers, students and community service workers. In addition to informing this core group, the coalition's social norms campaign is designed to help parents.

"If adults start to realize that most of the youth does not use (illegal drugs), they will feel a lot stronger in enforcing their expectations so they do not feel like they are fighting a tide too big for them," Hennig said.

Drug and alcohol abuse among young people adds costs to the judicial, education and health care systems, as well as

having a socio-economic impact in terms of future employment. Hennig said every dollar spent on prevention is estimated to save about \$12 in those other areas.

"That does not take into account its affect on families," she said.

Karen Little has been interested in the efforts of the coalition as a community member, the parent of a middle school student and in her role as chairwoman of the Newport After School Advisory Board. She said she and her husband try to be involved in their daughter's school life and want to be aware of the community's climate in terms of alcohol and illegal drug use among students.

"We realize that there are those pressures out there, and think it is best to be informed and be involved," she said.

Little said she concerned about youth drug and alcohol use because of its effects on the community.

"Anything that affects the community affects us," Little said. "I hope that is the way that everyone else in the community feels."

Little said awareness and communication with the community is the first step to addressing social pressures among young people.

"I think that a challenge for the coalition is to be able to get the information out beyond the people who have an inherent

interest in knowing that information," Little said. "There is a base that is concerned and interested, but the coalition wants to get beyond that."

"How do you reach the others, which is probably a big segment of people, that might not realize how big the issue is and how big of a role they can play in it?" Little asked.

The information, Little said, needs to be tied to the coalition's statistics when presented to the high school students to further their understanding.

"(The students) need to know what the ramifications are, how they affect them as people, the school, the teachers, what difference it makes in their personal life," Little said. "(They need to know) this is what is happening around you and how you can change that."

"The first thing is to really create the awareness that there is a problem coupled with the fact that yes, we can do something about it."

For more information about the coalition and its findings, visit www.cufsap.org.