

# S. Tahoe coalition receives multi-year drug grant

By Kathryn Reed

Drug use and abuse is nothing new in South Lake Tahoe. But there is a group in town that believes the status quo must go.

The South Tahoe Drug Free Coalition secured a \$150,000 federal grant for each of the next five years. The money will primarily go toward education and prevention. The funding starts Oct. 1.

South Lake Tahoe was one of nine communities in California and one of 147 nationwide to receive the Drug Free Communities grant.

“Look around, there is probably not one of us who doesn’t have a family member, an associate or someone in our different circles that has not been affected by substance abuse,” Erica Eng told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The grant is about prevention and prevention at a young age so kids don’t go down that route to begin with, so they don’t become addicted to alcohol, marijuana and prescription drugs.”

Eng works for Tahoe Youth & Family Services, the lead agency for the Drug Free Coalition. While she led the charge during the grant seeking process, Leanne Wagoner with Barton Health is now chair of the coalition. (This reporter is a member of the coalition.)

“Working toward reducing substance abuse in our community will benefit everyone. Substance abuse can be correlated with many other social health factors such as domestic violence or mental health, known as co-occurring disorders, which can negatively affect the quality of life for many living in our area,” Wagoner told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Additionally, from

Barton's perspective, reducing substance abuse may ultimately reduce healthcare costs. You see, when a patient is admitted to the hospital for a medical issue and it is combined with substance abuse, their stay tends to be longer. Many of these patients do not have the ability to pay for these services, which results in Barton donating this care, which affects the cost of healthcare for everyone."

The coalition also wants to work with Lake Tahoe Unified School District. Students from South Tahoe Middle School are part of the coalition. Going forward South Tahoe High students are expected to be part of the mix.

Here are some local stats from the California Healthy Kids Survey, which is conducted every two years in middle and high school:

- In LTUSD during the 2011-12 school year, 27 percent of freshmen and 46 percent for juniors said they had at least one alcoholic beverage in the past 30 days.
- The number of juniors in the district using alcohol in the past month was nearly 10 percent higher than the state average from 2004-10.

Barton Health's 2012 Community Health Needs Assessment showed that 29 percent of people living on the South Shore consider themselves binge drinkers. This is 12 percent higher than the national rate. The survey found local illegal drug use nearly four times the national rate.

"Barton has been working this past year on initiatives targeting substance abuse in our community by creating an awareness poster campaign in primary care offices encouraging patients to ask their doctor about available resources, supporting initiatives like the Drug Store Project and Every 15 Minutes through the volunteerism of many nurses and physicians, looking at pain management protocols and how Barton can be more proactive about looking into non-medication

solutions to address patients' pain, integrating an electronic medical record system which allows physicians to better manage a patient's care holistically and helps practitioners identify conflicts in care or overuse of medication, sponsoring local events and nonprofit organizations such as Tahoe Youth and Family Services, Live Violence Free, the Drug Store Project, and sober grad nights at both local high schools," Wagoner said.

Binge drinking was the subject of a study at the University of Michigan from 2005-11 where more than 16,000 high school students across the U.S. were surveyed. The results were released this month. The research revealed in the last two weeks 20.2 percent of high school seniors reported drinking more than five drinks or more at a time, 10.5 percent reported having 10 or more drinks, and 5.6 percent reported 15 or more drinks.

Other stats from the study: Rates of 5+ binge drinking and 10+ extreme binge drinking have declined since 2005, but rates of 15+ extreme binge drinking have not significantly declined. Students from more rural areas were more likely than students from metropolitan areas to consume 15 or more drinks.

Lake Tahoe is considered rural.

Some of the grant money will help keep current prevention programs intact. This includes Drug Store Project. In April, 350 sixth-graders went through the program that shows them the consequences of taking prescription drugs. (The 2014 event will be April 1 at Lake Tahoe Community College.)

Illegal drug use is not just a local issue. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., head of the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, on Sept. 25 chaired a hearing on dangerous synthetic drugs such as Molly, K2, Spice and bath salts.

She cited statistics, saying poison centers nationwide

responded to approximately 3,200 calls related to synthetic marijuana and bath salts in 2010 and that by 2011 that figure jumped to 12,834. Sixty percent of those calls were from people 25 and younger.

“In my view, synthetic drugs are diabolical. Synthetic drugs are often unregulated substances designed by scientists to mimic the effects of controlled substances. They are similar in chemical structure to Schedule 1 controlled substances. They are sold at gas stations, convenience stores, head shops and over the Internet,” Feinstein said during the hearing. “When Congress outlawed several of these synthetic drugs last year, traffickers did not stop producing them. Instead, they slightly altered the chemical structure of illegal drugs to skirt the law. By making these alterations, the drug traffickers produced what we call ‘controlled substance analogues’ which mimic the effects of drugs like ecstasy, cocaine, PCP and LSD.”

In July, Feinstein introduced the Protecting Our Youth from Dangerous Synthetic Drugs Act to give law enforcement the tools they need to prosecute individuals who produce and distribute controlled substance analogues. The bill would establish an inter-agency committee of scientists to be responsible for establishing and maintaining an administrative list of controlled substance analogues.

The local drug coalition will hire a coordinator to implement the goals of the group, oversee future programs, and manage the grant funds.

For more information about the South Tahoe Drug Free Coalition, including becoming a member or volunteering time, contact Erica Eng at [Erica@tahoeyouth.org](mailto:Erica@tahoeyouth.org).