

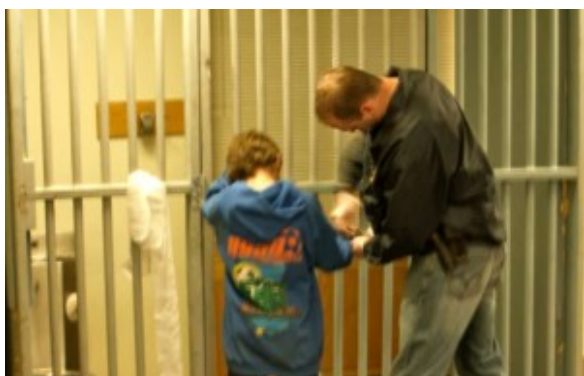
# Prevalence of drugs not going away in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Underage drug use and across-the-board abuse of drugs is nothing new.

But that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of people sounding the alarm that more needs to be done at an earlier age if the cycle is going to be broken, or at a minimum the number of users and abusers begins to decrease.

"I think drug education is extremely important. It's not necessarily incumbent on schools, but parents, too. There is an ongoing disconnect between what is going on and what parents know," Matt Underhill, sergeant with the El Dorado Sheriff's Office, told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Drug Store Project has multiple vignettes about the consequences of underage drug use, as well as abuse of drugs. Photo/Provided

Underhill is also commander of South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team now that the state has pulled out of this regional drug task force.

“Painkillers seem to be most sought after. I think a lot of kids are willing to experiment without knowing what they are ingesting,” Underhill said.

A national study conducted last year by Drugfree.org and MetLife Foundation found 49 percent of teens who misuse or abuse prescription medicines get them from a family member or friend.

According to a 2010 report by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 72 percent of high school students have consumed alcohol by the end of their senior year.

Robert Leri, superintendent of Tahoe Truckee Unified School District, in his monthly column, wrote, “We were recently made aware of the growing popularity of ‘butter wax’ or ‘shadow wax,’ a concentrated form of marijuana or hash oil that can contain nearly 20 times the THC levels compared to smoking marijuana. Reports have found that students in Washoe County have been using the wax before and during school and also using odorless e-cigarettes to smoke marijuana to avoid detection.” So far, TTUSD does not have that problem to contend with.

Prescription drug use is a major component of the annual Drug Store Project. The April 1 event is all about teaching sixth-graders on the South Shore about the consequences of “pharm parties” where meds are mixed and often ingested like candy.

“In all the research you’ll find that kids experiment (with drugs) around age 9 these days,” Lisa Huard told *Lake Tahoe News*. Huard is a safe schools coordinator and runs the Drug Store Project, which is put on under the umbrella of Tahoe Youth & Family Services.

Huard is a vocal proponent for more education about drugs in schools.

“Not until fifth grade and middle school is there talk about

drugs and the effects on their bodies,” Huard said of the curriculum in Lake Tahoe Unified School District. “We are teaching young kids about nutrition. That is paying off. If we are teaching about food, why are we not teaching about drugs? That goes in the body too.”

She wants research-validated curriculum to be used throughout K-12.

There was a time when LTUSD had more drug education. But state cuts, more emphasis on standardized testing and No Child Left Behind helped put an end to much of what was provided in the classroom.

Underhill believes the education needs to start at the elementary level.

“I do think an ongoing education program at a young age to supplement what the family is teaching is very important,” Underhill said. “Not teaching anything is not working.”

LTUSD Superintendent Jim Tarwater said at the K-5 level the emphasis is on fitness and health.

The district is working with the South Lake Tahoe Drug Coalition to be able to provide more education for youth. “We don’t have much now,” Tarwater admitted.

He believes catching students at the middle school level will keep them from having drug issues when they reach high school.

Marijuana is the district’s No. 1 problem. It’s the same for law enforcement when it comes youth users.

“I think we definitely need to have better controls over medicinal marijuana because it’s ending up in the hands of a lot of kids who are not patients,” Underhill said. “It’s becoming really accessible. Whether it’s sold or furnished, it is very accessible.”

Tarwater told *Lake Tahoe News*, “If kids on campus are caught using, usually it’s not alcohol, usually it’s marijuana. Instead of sending them off campus for three days, we will have in-house suspension.”

This will start next year for grades 6-12. The Drug Coalition is spearheading this idea. Agencies associated with it will provide drug counseling for the students.

Once in high school there is drug education in the ninth-grade health class.

What Huard would like more of is prevention education. Intervention is great, but by that time there is already a problem.

But it’s not just the youth in the community who are using drugs. Educators and officers say one of the stumbling blocks is kids are seeing their parents use. It’s hard to tell them “no” at school when at home the answer is “yes”.

In 2012, Barton Health through the Community Health Needs Assessment identified substance abuse as the most important health issue that needed to be addressed.

“The facts speak for themselves. South Lake Tahoe has four times the national average of illicit drug use. As a healthcare provider, we see a high percentage of chronic drinkers and a high rate of drug-induced deaths,” John Williams, CEO of Barton Health, said in this month’s executive team update.

Besides the hard drugs, Tarwater said school officials have noticed an increase of e-cigarette use. A trend in schools across the country is putting marijuana in an e-cigarette to avoid detection.

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**Other things to know:**

- The Caucus on International Narcotics Control Chairman Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Co-Chairman Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, are sponsoring a hearing on heroin and prescription drug abuse. The March 26 will be rescheduled.
- On April 8 from 7-8:30am the Truckee Donner Chamber of Commerce is hosting a panel discussion on Underage Drinking and Drug Abuse as a Community Issue. The meeting is at the Truckee Tahoe Airport. Cost is \$12 or \$10 for members.
- The DEA's National Prescription Take-Back Day is April 26 from 10am-2pm at locations throughout California and Nevada. More info is online.
- More information about Drug Store Project is available online.
- Truckee police officers will start making visits to Truckee High School with Trax, the drug-detecting dog, to ensure no illegal drugs are being brought to campus.