

Local Summit looks at ways to control teenage substance abuse



Written by MIMI KOREN
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Community involvement is critical, says RADAR

Teenage drinking is a “major public health and safety issue,” says the US Surgeon General, and “ending [it] is everyone’s job.” The Local Summit dedicated its June 16 meeting to that task, with a presentation from the Larchmont/Mamaroneck RADAR (Responsible Action: a Drug and Alcohol Resource).



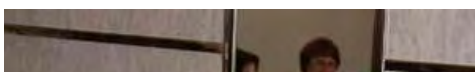
RADAR’s president, Janet Buchbinder, and board member Evan Stern, a guidance counselor at the Hommocks School, discussed the results of RADAR’s 2008 survey on alcohol and marijuana use at the Hommocks and Mamaroneck High School. They also reviewed the impact of alcohol on teenage brain development, to an audience of about 35 from the fields of education, social services, business, religion, law enforcement and government. It was RADAR’s third public presentation on the subject, and the Summit’s last gathering before the summer recess.

The meeting will be telecast on LMC-TV on Tuesdays at 7:00 pm, and Wednesdays at 1:00 a.m., 7:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. on Channel 75 (Cablevision) or Channel 36 (Verizon).

Stern maintained that the survey showed “overall favorable results,” with modest reductions in the use of alcohol and other substances in most grades. But other figures were not so positive. More than 80 percent of twelfth graders reported having had alcohol in the previous month, while marijuana use grew across most grades surveyed; it actually doubled among high school seniors since 2002, when the first survey was taken.

Stern did acknowledge that “compared to national norms, our statistics are higher.” As previously reported in The Sound and Town Report, the rate of binge drinking among tenth and twelfth graders is more than twice the national norm; more than half the seniors said they had done binge drinking in the preceding two weeks. Nearly half also reported being drunk or high on drugs while in school, and the numbers have increased since 2006, when the previous survey was taken: twelfth graders reported using marijuana in the previous 30 days at more than double the national rate.

While these figures are comparable to those in other Westchester communities, Buchbinder admitted, “We’re alarmed.” She identified available cash, loose supervision, time on their hands and easy access to drugs as the major risk factors to substance abuse.



In video excerpts of a talk at the Hommocks, substance-abuse expert Mike Nerney described the harm that alcohol inflicts on the

developing adolescent brain. It slows the growth of decision-making abilities, which do not fully mature until age 25, as well as memory and cognitive function. This double whammy has long-term effects: drinking hinders the ability to judge, for example, when you're taking dangerous risks, at the very time in life when that ability should be maturing.

This disproves the idea that early drinking helps teenagers learn to drink responsibly. The truth is, the younger one starts drinking, said Stern, the greater the risk of irresponsibility.

Since teenagers need risk, Nerney continued, adults must help them choose healthy risk-taking – as in sports or the performing arts – over negative behaviors such as shoplifting. RADAR found that the after-school period, before adults return home from work, poses the greatest risk to students, said Buchbinder, and a member of the audience said local kids feel they have no place to go on Friday and Saturday nights. In response, a RADAR task force organized an “After School at the Café” at MHS; the 100 kids who attended “had a blast just hanging out.” Nine such events are planned for the coming year. “We hope for community support so we can hold these on a regular basis,” she said. A Youth Center has been a long-time dream for RADAR members; a lack of money has kept it from being realized.

“Parental attitudes to drinking are critical,” Stern asserted; zero tolerance of teen drinking should be the message. Family meals – at least five or more a week – have a positive impact. But, noted Buchbinder, neither “schools ... [nor] parents can do it alone.”

“One of the strongest protective factors for kids is being involved in the community,” Buchbinder continued. Here the meeting revealed the value of coalitions such as the Summit, as members of the audience sprang forth with new ideas: get more grandparents involved; engage students in volunteer work; require that high-school students perform community service, as many other high schools do.

To those who say, “We can't change,” Buchbinder replies, along with the Obama campaign “Yes, we can.” She points to the success in changing public attitudes toward smoking, heart disease, and more recently, childhood obesity.

The survey did not examine reasons for the trends it identified, nor the socioeconomic breakdown of its findings. Buchbinder said that a follow up study next year would do “community mapping,” which might provide some answers.

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