

Taking Charge of Substance Abuse



By David E. Most
Mayor, Lacey Township

On February 27, the Lacey Township Substance Abuse Task Force hosted a "RED Night Out" to raise awareness about the dangers of substance abuse. Approximately 800 parents, grandparents, educators, students and community members attended the dinner meeting, many of whom were dressed in red.

The evening's featured speakers were Steve Willis, a father and lawyer, whose son has been battling addiction, and Police Captain David Paprota. Emotions ran high as Mr. Willis' story brought home the anguish a parent

endures with a child struggling with addiction. Captain Paprota, a Task Force member, forced the audience to face just how prevalent substance abuse is in Lacey Township. There were audible gasps heard in the room as the Captain revealed the stats for 2012: 43 overdoses, which resulted in eight deaths.

He emphasized that Lacey Township was not any different than other suburban towns in New Jersey. Also surprising to the audience was the revelation that many kids who begin to experiment with prescription drugs are forced to resort to heroin because it's cheaper and more readily available.



Pictured at the "RED Night Out" program, which seeks to raise awareness about the dangers of substance abuse are (top) Lacey Township Police Captain David Paprota, Lacey Township Mayor Dave Most, Tom Faulkner, Jean Tymczyszyn, Terry Chapman, Dr. Sandra Brower, Heather Scanlon, Jeff Brewer, Linda Applegate and (front) James Wioland, and Donna McAvoy. Approximately 800 people attended the dinner meeting held February 27 in the Lacey Township High School Auditorium.

The evening was opened by messages from Task Force members Reverend Linda Applegate and myself. At the event, I described my encounter with a resident who was posting a notice about the drug awareness program at one of the larger businesses in town. He told me that he had just lost his daughter to a drug overdose and thanked me for spearheading this awareness effort.

On "RED Night Out" I asked participants to imagine what such parents are going through. I asked, "Do you think they are thinking about a second chance? Are they trying to replay it over again? Their sons and daughters are with God and the second chance they are talking about is not for their children, it is for your children."

I also told the large audience that I have known far too many people in the community who have lost daughters and sons, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers to substance abuse. I also reminded everyone that addiction is a brain disease.

The program concluded with a panel discussion. Superintendent of Schools and Task Force member Dr. Sandra Brower joined Steve Willis and Captain Paprota in answering questions submitted by the audience. Time did not allow for all the questions to be answered that evening, however they were forwarded to the appropriate respondent and the answers are being compiled and placed on the school's website. The impact of this program will have a lasting effect as residents will be able to view the entire program through the school's website.

RED Night Out was the culmination of many years of attempts by the Municipal Alliance and partnering groups to educate the community about substance abuse in Lacey Township. Frankly, the results of our previous efforts have been mixed.

Establishing the Task Force Frustrated by the lack of attendance at previous drug awareness events, Alliance Coordinator Heather Scanlon saw the need to involve the township leadership in the effort. She invited members of the religious community, school district, Municipal Alliance, Police Department, pharmacists, parent/teacher groups, governing body members, the Chamber of Commerce, & recreation department staff to participate. This multi-disciplinary task force began meeting in 2012. They began to prepare a mission statement and set goals on what they wanted to accomplish.

The mission was simple—to promote awareness and prevent substance abuse through education. The first goal was to establish a Prescription Drug Drop Box in the community, where people could safely dispose of unused and/or expired prescription drugs.

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Over 70 percent of the prescription drugs people abuse are received through friends and family in some manner. Ours is one of only three Prescription Drop Boxes in Ocean County. Thanks to the efforts of the Task Force and the Attorney General's Office, people now have access to proper disposal 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The Substance Abuse Task Force worked to make Lacey Township a candidate for the Drop Box. The Police Department carefully wrote new policy to manage the disposal process. The success of this initiative showed many of the people in the community that the Lacey Township Task Force was going to make positive change in the community.

The Drop Box was a tangible item, but the Task Force recognized the need to do more. They began to discuss ways to educate the public and raise awareness of how substance abuse is affecting the community. Task Force member Reverend Linda Applegate organized what would be the first dinner symposium at the Lacey

United Methodist Church, called Children & Youth Prescription Drug Use: The Unscripted Reality, co-sponsored by Meridian Health.

This education session allowed the medical professionals to understand the growing trends in drug abuse and educate physicians with the most up to date information about the impact it has in our communities. This event was only the first step in raising awareness in the community. The next step was to host a dinner symposium for parents and grandparents, which would eventually be called "RED Night Out" with RED being an acronym for Reaching and Educating a Drug-Free Community.

The Task Force realized early in the planning process for "RED Night Out" that it was critical to be innovative in its approach to promoting the event. In the past parents were reluctant to attend any type of program that has drug or substance abuse in its title, the perception being "Not My Kid." The decision was made to offer extra credit to students whose parents attended the program as an incentive.

The task force decided to use red ribbons as a marketing tool. Red ribbons and posters were delivered to businesses in town. Business owners were pleasantly surprised at the request to display the red ribbons since they are so accustomed to being asked for their support through monetary donations. They seemed relieved that something was being done about the substance abuse problem and that they were being included.

Also, local establishments that had digital marquis signs were asked to post messages promoting and/or supporting RED Night Out. Magnetic red ribbons were placed on all the school busses, red ribbon lapel pins were distributed to residents and silicone wristbands were delivered to each and every student in the Lacey Township School District with the simple message: "The Best Me is Drug Free."

While "RED Night Out" did seem to unify the community, it is clear that the Task Force still has much work ahead. The Task Force recognizes that this is only the beginning in its mission of educating the residents about the epidemic threatening the health of our community. It is their hope that some day one can truly say Lacey is drug-free. ▲